

Unbound by Time  
by Bellavue

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Summary: 'This doesn't mean I will not kill you in the future. You've made me really, really curious, kitten.' There was a reason why Yukimura Chizuru's life was spared the night she was discovered by the Shinsengumi. This is a chronicle telling the unsung story of a girl who made the legend possible. OkitaxOC pairing.

## 1. Chapter 1: The Beginning of the Legend

A/N: This story does not include Chizuru. It happened before she came to the Shinsengumi. For those who are expecting to read about the historical events that happened during the anime, i recommend you not to continue reading this one. I am planning to focus on the romance part so you may find this cheezy if you are not interested in that. I am planning to create situations of my own but I will still try my best to follow the main theme. Anyway, I hope you enjoy this one. This is my first fanfiction so i hope you review! I am actually against writing fanfictions at first out of fear but I loved Hakuouki so much I decided to throw all those fears out of the window. Okay, I've probably already said too much, so here it is!

\* \* \*

><p>The night Yukimura Chizuru found herself running amidst the falling white snow with two rogue men at her heels; she was convinced that she won't be able to see the sun rise again. She believed the snowy night to be the final twilight of her life, her breath stolen from her body with the sharp blade of a katana. She was gasping for breath when she found a dark alley and dove behind the well on the sidewalk, hoping that it will somehow conceal her small form. Her sense of safety was short lived, however, as she heard the unmistakable piercing of a blade into flesh and the agonized screams of the men pursuing her. Her brown eyes widened in pure terror as she watched two new shadows assaulting her pursuers, the laughter of the attackers wild and crazy in her ears.</p>

Hearing the dull sound of a body falling and the scuffle of sandals

in the soft snow that has gathered in the ground, she fell back, shaking into the shadows of her hiding place. She knew it was hopeless. Chizuru first saw the bloodied tip of the sword. Then came the sky blue robe with white patterns. The maniacal panting of the man holding the weapon tore her gaze and she felt her breath catch in her throat as she stared back at the bright red eyes of the monster in front of her. He was covered in blood and his hair was white. He did not seem human. His twisted sadistic grin was proof to that. The monster lifted his sword and Chizuru found herself closing her eyes and raising her arms in front of her. A scream was ripped away from her throat as she waited for the pain and burn of steel slashing through her flesh. She prayed that it will be quick.

But the pain never came. For what seemed to be the hundredth time that night, she heard the sickening sound of flesh being punctured with something sharp and deadly. Chizuru opened her eyes to see the monster fallen and bloodied on the ground. A man with dark hair was standing in front of her, holding a katana covered with blood. He had the same uniform as the monster but he was human. At least he looked human to her as she caught a glance of his blue eyes. She did not have time to fully take in his appearance though as she jumped and shrunk back to the shadows when a voice sounded off not too far from her hiding place.

'What a pity! I wanted to kill both of them myself. You were fast this time, Saitou-kun.'

'I only did as my duty required,' the man who killed off the monsters answered stoically.

Chizuru heard footsteps approach and saw the figure of a brown haired man with cold green eyes. Her blood froze in her veins as he looked at her and smirked. His smile promised pain and death and for the third time that evening, she felt sure that she would undoubtedly meet her creator before dawn. A new set of footfalls approached and she found herself staring at the tip of a sword which glinted under the light of the moon.

'Listen, don't try to run. If you try to run, I'll kill you,' a man with long black hair stood up in front of her, his robe and hair waving in the wind. Amidst her fear, she found herself holding her breath as she thought about how beautiful he is with the snow falling around him looking like off-seasonal cherry blossoms. That was when she started to lose focus. Her emotions overloaded with fear and her nerves strung to their limit, her gaze started to blur around the edges as she stared at the samurai in front of her. The last thing she remembered was the short prayer of thanks she sent to the gods before darkness fully consumed her. If she was going to die, at least she will not be conscious to experience it.

'My my, did she faint because you scared her, Hijikata-san?' the green-eyed man asked playfully as he knelt before the fainted girl.

'Vice-captain, what do we do with the bodies?' the one with the dark hair asked as he also knelt and studied the men he just slaughtered.

'Just remove their coats and let the inspectors handle the rest,' the man called Hijikata answered calmly.

'What do we do with this one?' his brown haired companion asked.

It took a while for Hijikata to answer.

'We'll take her back to the headquarters with us.'

'Eh? Is it safe not to kill her? She saw what happened,' he asked the man who is clearly in charge, worry etched on his face.

'We'll decide what we do with her after we return,' with that, he turned around with an unreadable expression on his face.

\* \* \*

><p>Yukimura Chizuru was not exactly mistaken in her belief that her life will end that night. The Shinsengumi, a group of warriors protecting the interests of the shogunate were a ruthless pack. They follow strict orders and don't take a moment to hesitate using their swords to protect their beliefs. They are also keeping a dark secret. A secret that no other living being outside their group is allowed to know. That is why Hijikata's decision to not end the girl's life right then and there was more than just out of character but a violation to their rules. But he was vice-captain and his words cannot be questioned. That's why Souji Okita, the man with the cold green eyes did not say another word as he lifted the frail frame of the girl into his arms and followed him into the night. Saitou Hajime, having finished removing the light blue robes off their fallen soldiers also looked at the figure in his friend's arms, a questioning look on his face. Without a word, they trodded after their vice-captain with Yukimura Chizuru warm, breathing, and alive with them.<p>

For all they know, Hijikata's unreadable expression morphed into a pained one the moment he turned around. When Okita asked him what to do with the girl, he was just about to give the order to end her life when something stopped him. He did not know what it was but a painful squeezing in his heart led him to give out a different order. Now, his eyebrows are scrunched together as he tried his best to figure out what happened. It was a memoryâ€|yesâ€|a memoryâ€|

'A girl will come into your lives, Hijikata. You will know it was her once you see her. Do not kill her. Do you understand? Whatever happens, protect her. Do not kill herâ€|'

A faint voice of a woman sounded off in his head. He closed his eyes and tried to concentrate in remembering her. What he only managed, however, is a blurred vision of a girl with red lips. Feeling a headache forming at the back of his head, he finally opened his eyes and sighed. Yes, whatever it is, they'll just decide what to do with the girl they found tonight at the headquarters.

\* \* \*

><p>Akane closed the book with a sigh. No matter how many times she read it, her eyes still stung with tears afterwards. She leaned her head and gazed at the sakura drifting on their branches above her. She was in a meadow not too far from their house, sitting underneath the lone sakura tree on the small hill overlooking their town. It was her most favorite place in the planet and she makes it a point to

visit it every day after school. Strangely enough, she always finds herself wanting to read the book about the Shinsengumi every time she can afford to stay under that tree for a long period of time.<p>

She looked at the ancient book on her lap and ran her fingers over its beaten up cover. She already forgot the number of times she read it and the number of tears she shed for it. The deaths, the blood, and the sadness. They all tugged at her heartstrings until she has no other choice but to cry for the poor souls that were broken and wasted during that time.

But there was another reason why Akane was so fixated with the book.

Every time she picks it up, the voices inside her head were silenced. Yes, she can hear voices though she has long established that she was not crazy. No, her mother said she was just different. It's okay she said, it was natural for us descendants of the oni, she said.

Akane was five when she first heard them. She can still remember her face lighting up with a smile when her mother assured her that everything was normal about her. After a couple of years, however, she realized that what was normal for her family was not average for the people around her. The girls she played with can go to sleep without a voice lulling a lullaby in their heads. The boys that she went to classes with don't have to scrunch their faces just so they can concentrate on what the teacher was saying because murmurs were whispered to them unbeknownst to others. No, Akane was not crazy but she wasn't normal either.

The voices haven't tried to hurt her though. Sometimes they sang lullabies to her; sometimes she can hear them giggling softly every time a funny racket goes on in front of her eyes in the classroom. There are also very rare moments that they seem to tell her stories. Stories of a great war. A great love. Of bloodshed, and of loyalty and friendship. They don't harm her, yes, but sometimes she just can't help but wish that she was alone in her head.

She only gets that peace every time she holds the book.

The book was a part of the vast family library of the Taka-shiis. She first knew about it when she was eight. They were asked by their homeroom teacher to write a short paragraph about their hero. Akane can still remember running towards her mother excitedly that afternoon, squealing to her that she's going to tell her classmates tomorrow that her mother is her greatest hero. Her mother, however, simply gave her that soft smile of hers and patted her head. Let's go to the library together, Akane, she said. Your mama is not the real hero. There, I will show you the real person you should admire.

Hand in hand, they walked towards their library filled with books old and new. It seemed just like a couple of days ago when her mother opened the double doors of their library. The sound of the racket of voices that instantly echoed in her head the moment she set foot on the room was still clearly etched in her memory. They were more agitated, excited, and frightened than usual. Akane winced and tugged at her mother's arm leading her inside.

'Mama, mama. My head is blurry.'

'Yes, I know my dear. Hush,' her mother said, the angelic smile still on her face.

'I don't want to go. They don't like this place,' she tugged at her mother's hand once more but the older woman continued to walk, leading her into one of the farthest corners of the room. She was just about to cry and throw a tantrum when her mother slowly ran a finger on the spine of a dusty book from one of the shelves, gracefully pulled it, and gave it to her. She shook her head but the woman just smiled and offered her the book again.

'Here, touch it.'

Her eyes brimming with tears, Akane finally surrendered and took the book from her. The moment her fingers grazed the cover, sudden silence invaded her thoughts. The voices were gone completely and she looked back at her mother in shock.

'You are a special girl, Akane. Read this book and etch its story in your heart. The people there are the true heroes. It's time you know about the story of our ancestor, my darling,' her mother said with a faraway look on her face.

After she finished reading it for the first time, the voices in her head became calm and rare. Since then, she always visits the library to borrow the book. It was a blessing to her.

Now, as she turned to gaze again at the sakura blowing gently in the wind above her, she gave a silent thank you that she was not born in a world so sad and hopeless. The heroes during the time of Yukimura Chizuru, her ancestor, all died with honor, but still they died even before their time. She closed her eyes and breathed in the fresh air. Then she heard it in her own mind. A sole voice. Soft and feminine.

'It'll come Akane-chan. It'll come soon.'

## 2. Chapter 2: Losing Gravity

'Akane-chan, are you coming?'

Akane looked up from rummaging her bag and gave a bright smile to her friend.

'Ah, Rika, yes. I was just checking if I have my passport. I thought I forgot it,' she said almost sheepishly.

'Oh Akane, who do you think you're fooling? I know you have maids to, I don't know, arrange your stuff for you,' a voice from behind her said. Rika and Akane looked up to see a gorgeous red-haired woman with a big duffel bag slung over her shoulder. Her eyes are a brilliant shade of bluish green and she has a playful smile on her face.

'Suzume! You're late!' Rika scolded the newly arrived, flipping her light brown hair over her shoulders in a playful way. Rika is half American and Japanese and her mixed race gave her the perfect

combination of soft and sharp features. Her light brown eyes scanned Suzume's appearance and snorted at the sight of the manly bag the other girl was carrying. We are going to Hawaii and you decided to bring that hideous luggage?

Suzume glanced at the bag she was carrying with a clueless expression on her face. 'What? It's big and comfy. I'd rather bring one package than suffer like you there. What, did you bring your whole house?' she pointed towards the three or so bags that Rika had placed on the floor around her.

Akane found herself laughing at the normal bickering between her two best friends. She was not really a talkative person but the two seemed to perfectly compensate her lack of love for talking. Being the youngest daughter of her clan, she was not exposed to other children so much when she was young. Girls her age steered clear of her, thinking she was way above their level and boys also left her alone out of fear of the guards that sometimes flanked her whenever she goes to school. She was a lonely child until she met Rika and Suzume at middle school. The energy of the two seemed to have no limit and she easily clicked with them despite of their contrasting personalities. Suzume was the boyish type who did not seem to mind her family and status while Rika was the protective girlfriend who easily understood her silent moments. They were like the rays of sunshine that suddenly entered her quiet life. Brilliant and surprising but not unwelcome.

'So, where's the private jet of our young mistresss here?' Suzume winked and nudged her playfully. Akane couldn't help but blush. She had never felt comfortable whenever people mention their family's standing. She knew at an early age that not everyone has a private jet, a couple of houses in different prefectures, and an island. In that aspect, Akane knew that she is once again different from the normal.

'Stop it, idiot. You're embarrassing the girl,' Rika chastised their more boisterous friend and picked up all her bags. She started walking towards one of the airport's gates.

'What? If I'm as rich as you, I will be hella proud of it,' the red haired shot back and followed Rika.

The Taka-shiis were a renowned family in Japan. Some say that they were a part of the Yakuza while others claimed that they were a far off relative of the Japanese royal family. Akane, however, knew better. Her ancestor simply married a wealthy lord who is believed to have come from a renowned clan before. Despite of their wealth, their family is loved and respected by the people who knows them. They help in several charities and have never been alleged to use their position, power, and money to their advantage. Still, there was still a wall that separated her from the rest of the world. Being a daughter of a renowned heritage, she was raised in a different way. At an early age, she was trained in archery and a little bit in kendo, two hobbies that were not exactly taught to girls her age. She was also well-versed in the feminine arts. Being a traditional clan, she had to learn about flower arranging and performing Japanese dances.

They have finally reached the exclusive gate where their private plane was and Akane smiled at the expressions on her friends' faces.

Their class was supposed to go to Hawaii next week but having her own resources, Akane offered to take her friends in advance during the weekend because they seemed too excited about it.

'Let's go?' she asked, handing her luggage to a man who quickly approached them. Rika and Suzume almost squealed in delight as they ran towards the small aircraft, completely forgetting about their bags. She simply laughed and shook her head. This is definitely going to be a fun trip.

\* \* \*

><p>'Would you like another cup of soda, Akane-sama?' Keiko, the attendant assisting them today asked politely.<p>

'No, thank you. Maybe my two friends would like more though. Please prioritise them today,' she answered, giving the woman a friendly smile. Keiko bowed in respect and approached Rika and Suzume who were bickering about swimsuits. Ah, they must be excited to hit the beach. Hawaii has some of the best beaches in the world after all. Knowing perfectly well that she'll end up being dragged by the two all day long, she decided to have a short nap before their touch down.

She had barely closed her eyes when she found herself opening them again in alarm as she felt the aircraft rock slightly.

'Is something wrong?' Rika asked from the seat across from her. It was her and Suzume's first time to go out of the country through air transport so they were more nervous than normal.

'Oh, don't worry. It's perfectly norm-'

But Keiko wasn't able to finish her sentence when another shake, this time stronger, rocked the plane again. Akane looked at the flight attendant worriedly who immediately moved and checked the cockpit.

They did not get the chance to know what was wrong.

Akane gasped as a bright flash of lightning crossed the sky. The sky, which was a clear blue just a couple of minutes ago, had turned dark and foreboding. She closed her eyes again and covered her ears as another streak of light flashed through her window. She anticipated thunder to boom after it but she found herself crying a shout of pure fear as a crackling and dreadful sound pierced the air instead. The lightning had hit the tail of their airplane.

And they are hurtling downwards in full speed.

\* \* \*

><p>Akane didn't waste any time to run towards Rika and Suzume who were both scared beyond their wits. She held onto them, hugging them to her protectively with the crazy idea that she can protect them as long as she keeps them close. Shouts were heard from the cockpit as the pilot struggled to gain control of the aircraft. Slowly, she started to move towards the front of the plane to see if she can help.<p>

'Akane no! Don't leave! You might hurt yourself!' she stared at Rika

wild-eyed as the girl held on to her arms. She looked near hysterical in fear but still she worried about her. Forcing herself to swallow the lump in her throat, she took a step back and held their hands.

'Rika, Suzume. Everything will be alright,' she reached out towards a small space above their seats and pulled off three bright orange life vests. 'We will probably crash on the sea. Wear this,' she gave them the vests and also put on her own. She might have looked calm and confident but inside her head, she was panicking. If her friends die, if the only two people who were nice enough to accept her die, it will be because of her. It will be her fault.

The aircraft shook again and she nearly stumbled on the aisle if not for Suzume reaching out for her hand. She immediately collapsed on the two and hugged them tightly for support and out of fear of what might happen. She felt the plane hurtling downwards faster than ever. They will probably crash in less than 15 seconds.

Suddenly, everything went on slow motion for her. She watched as Rika wiped the tears on her eyes with a shaky hand and Suzume biting her lip in fear, drawing out blood. These peopleâ€œif only she can protect them from any kind of pain. She felt the hands of her two friends grasp her tightly and she closed her eyes as one phrase escaped her lips.

'I'm sorry.'

The last thing she knew before darkness overtook her was her silent call to no one in particular:

'Save my friends. Spare them please. You can get my life if you want. Just give me the power to save them.'

### 3. Chapter 3: The Wolves of Mibu

A/N: Hi there! Thank you so much for the reviews! Glad I was able to stir the curiosity of a few people. Here's another chappie for you. I hope you continue reading the story. And oh, I don't own Hakuouki. If I do, I'll be the happiest girl in the world with all that hotness around me! Cookies for those who review!

\* \* \*

><p>Light. Darkness tried to swallow it but it was too strong. It became brighter and brighter until it seemed to conquer everything. The sky, the sea, the earth. There was no time, no past, no present, no future. The universe simply became a solid white ball of light.</p>

\_Is this death? Is this finally it?\_

Akane felt herself floating in abyss. Her body felt light and her head was at peace. If this is how it feels to be dead, then it's not that bad, she thought. She might be alone but at least she is not cold or hurting. Somewhere faraway, she can hear screams. The small part of her mind that was active thought it may be the souls of those damned in hell. Then the sounds got louder and louder. Until finally, it felt like the tortured souls were just a few feet away from her.

Is she going to burn with them? Will she suffer like those damned?

'Finish everyone who fights back!'

'You don't need to tell me twice!'

Akane stirred at the orange light behind her lids. Every fiber in her body screamed pain. The peace she relished just a while ago was gone in an instant, replaced by screams and a nagging pain on her head. She tried moving her hands to see if she was still floating. Her body still felt light except that now she felt an undeniable cold seeping through her body.

What is going on?

She opened her eyes and blinked. Sunlight and trees? Confused at what is happening she turned her head to the side only to have her sight blurred with water. She flailed and tried to push her body up, sputtering as she finally managed to get her head into the surface. Looking around, she found herself sitting waist deep on a river. A large boulder of rock was just behind her, stopping her body from being drifted downstream. She was shivering with cold.

And very alive.

Before she can gather her thoughts, she heard footsteps from the forest on her left. The screams she heard were also coming from that side though now they are fewer and the voices were weaker. The undeniable sounds of fighting brought back some sense into her and she flailed to get off the water as she heard the footsteps going towards her direction.

'Some of them escaped here!'

'After you, shorty!'

She barely managed to hide behind a large bark of tree on the other side of the river when two men barged into the clearing. One had short brown hair with startling blue eyes while the other one looked younger and had lighter, long brown hair held by a high ponytail. Both were wearing sky blue robes with white patterns on the sleeves. They were also holding swords dripping with blood. Akane gasped at the sight. What on earth is going on? Where am I? Who are these people?

'What? No more enemies?!" the shorter one who looked barely 16 yelled agitatedly. His companion looked around with his sharp eyes, making her shrink back to the shadows of the tree she was hiding on.

'Just when I was getting warmed up,' he gruffly said, swinging his sword to swipe some of the blood away.

Akane grasped at her chest, trying to still her beating heart. Her mind was a muddled mess. The last thing she remembers was being in her private jet with Rika and Suzume. They were just about to crash. Her eyes widened at that last thought.

Rika and Suzume! If I am here, that means they are also somewhere in this place!

She peeked a little from her hiding place and saw the two men now washing their hands on the river.

'I guess we should get going, huh? We don't want the vice commander catching us frolicking in the water for too long,' the one with the short hair said as he wriggled his hands to shake off the water. Then he turned around and started walking to the direction where they came from. His companion followed him.

She breathed a sigh of relief.

\_Now, I have to find my friends. If I'm alive, there's a big chance they survived the crash too. Please, let them be safe\_, she thought as she turned around, trying her best to be silent with her movements.

'Hey, looks like there's still one left.'

Akane barely had time to scream when she felt a hand pull her roughly using the back of her collar. Her defense mechanism made her flail and kick but her captor was too strong and held her easily down. She continued struggling even as she felt him turning her around to face him. She was just about to tell him to go to hell when she found herself looking at the most beautiful green eyes she had ever seen.

'Hmm? A girl? Now I wasn't expecting that,' the man smirked as he studied her with predatory eyes. His hair was a rich brown color that nearly reached his shoulders and he is wearing the same blue robes she spied on the two men across the riverbank earlier. He was also holding a sword that is presently just a few centimeters away from her neck.

'Souji, you found another one?' her eyes glanced briefly behind him to see a man with red hair running towards them. Behind him were four more who were also holding blood coated swords.

'Whoah, whoah. Who is that?' the red haired guy stopped on his tracks as he caught sight of her. His four companions slowed their pace to a cautious walk when her captor turned her around so that she was facing her companions, her right arm securely locked on her back.

'I was also thinking the same thing when I found her slinking in the shadows,' he said in a playful yet mocking voice.

'Heh, there's still more! The faster one gets to kill him, Shinpachi!' the voice of the boy she saw earlier sounded off behind her. They must have heard the noise and rushed over to their side.

'Hey brat! Stop right there!'

Akane felt herself being stirred again to face the newly arrived duo. The two stopped mid-run, however, when they saw her.

'Huh? Whoâ€"what?' the younger one sputtered as he stared at her, his sword already out of its sheath.

A man with long black hair cautiously approached her, a suspicious

look on his face. Their garb and weapons obviously showed they are warriors but their expressions clearly expressed that the last thing they were expecting was a girl in the middle of the woods.

'Who are you? Speak,' the black-haired man asked her with a commanding voice.

She couldn't find the voice to answer him. She found herself staring at his sky blue robe, the wheels of her mind finally catching up to what was happening. Sky blue robes with white mountain patternsâ€|katanasâ€|samuraisâ€|could it beâ€|no. It was not possible. It cannot be possible.

'The vice-captain asked you a question, girl,' her captor whispered in her ear and she felt his grasp on her right hand tighten, causing her to whimper a little.

'Souji, you're hurting her,' a middle-aged man with short, almost cropped black hair and a kind face worriedly said from behind the person they called vice-captain. She felt the hold on her arm loosen a little as the man holding her chuckled.

'If you want to extend your life even for just a couple of minutes, I suggest you answer the question,' he said, causing a chill to run down her spine.

'Iâ€"I'm Akane. Akane Taka-shii, s-sir.'

'What are you doing here? Don't you know this part of the woods is dangerous?' the long-haired man asked.

'Iâ€|Iâ€|'

'Are you a spy?'

'N-no!'

'Your clothes are not from here. Where are you from?'

She unconsciously looked down on her clothes which were soaking wet. She was wearing a white button down, skinny jeans, and sneakers. She must have looked strange for them.

'I'm fromâ€|from Edo.'

'People from Edo don't dress like thatâ€|' a man wearing round spectacles observed from behind the vice-captain. He had shoulder-length hair and a calm look on his face that seemed deeply out of place in the current situation.

'I amâ€|I amâ€|'

'If there is something you want to say to save your life I suggest you say it now. Otherwise we'll have no choice but to finish you,' the vice-captain said despite the protest of the middle-aged man behind him. Akane's eyes widened in fear as a man with tied, long dark hair trailing over his shoulder stepped up, unsheathing his sword. He walked towards her in deathly calm, his face expressionless.

'Wait, wait! I-!'

Her predator still continued to advance. She tried to struggle but the grip on her arm only tightened.

\_What should I say?! They will never believe me no matter what I say!\_

Her mind working on overdrive, she blurted the first thing that came to mind just as the man raised his sword to slash her.

'I want to join the Shinsengumi!'

#### 4. Chapter 4: The She Wolf

A/N: Hakuouki is not mine, unfortunately. enjoy!

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><p>Akane was not at all surprised when her declaration was answered by silence by her would be killers. She squirmed a little as a birdcall sounded off from far away, its tone adding into the awkwardness of the situation. She was just about to repeat what she said when the man holding her broke the silence by laughing out loud. His mirth was so sarcastic and condescending that she even had the courage to look back and glare at him.</p>

'What? You can't be serious!' he said, tears almost brimming in his green eyes.

'I am actually quite serious, you jerk,' she hissed. She's not really the antagonistic type of girl but there is just something about the man that made her want to put him in his right place.

'Does that explain why you are here?' the vice-captain asked, his expression even more sullen than before.

'Uhâ€|yes. I saw you leave your headquarters and followed you all here,' she lied, hoping that her voice sounded confident.

'So you were indeed spying on us,' the bespectacled man said.

'I'm not really spying in a bad wayâ€|it's just thatâ€|I...' she looked around and flinched at the seven pairs of eyes staring at her. 'Iâ€|look up to you so much that I wanted to see you in action,' she finally blurted out then silently chastised herself for the foolishness of her statement.

'Huh! So at least there is one person who doesn't hate us!' the man who she figured to be Shinpachi said, pounding a fist on his chest.

'Yeah, well that's a breath of fresh air,' the youngest of the group quipped, looking proud of himself.

'Let us not forget the real issue here,' the vice-captain silenced the two. 'This girl followed us. That means that she saw our targets.'

Silence again. The red haired man looked at the vice-captain in question while the youngest one shifted on his feet uncomfortably.

'Let's just kill her.'

'What? Wait! Please!' Akane shouted out of shock and struggled to look back at the one holding her. 'I told you I want to join your group!'

'You're a woman,' the man with the long hair who was just about to murder her earlier said matter-of-factly.

'Yes, I am.'

'Which means there is no possible way that you can be of help to us.'

She was just about to give them a lecture about men and their rotten machismo when she remembered the time she was in. Women in this era wear restrictive clothes and are expected to pour tea and take care of a home. They are not actually expected to know how to fight, let alone kill. She nearly winced at that last thought. But she decided to change tactics.

'I can fight. Just give me a chance. I'll show you,' she said with as much confidence as possible, not daring to blink as she looked back at the cold eyes of the vice-captain.

'Hijikata, why don't we just let her try?' the middle-aged man asked, worry lacing his voice.

'She's a girl Kondou-san. We can't let a girl enter our ranks.'

'Let's just humor her, shall we? We can't really kill her here. She's a civilian after all.'

'Butâ€"

'Hijikata.'

Akane looked up in surprise at the sudden sharpness of the man's tone. His face still looked calm but there was something about him that suddenly made her realize his position in the group. Ahâ€|he must be Kondo Isami. The renowned captain of the Shinsengumi.

Hijikata sighed in resignation before looking at her again.

'One chance. Don't blame us if you end up dead after this. Souji. Tie her up. We're heading back.'

\* \* \*

><p>Akane shifted her weight to her other foot as she looked around her. She is currently in a room similar to a doujou except with a wall lined with various kinds of weapons. There were rows and rows of swords, spears, there was even a box that suspiciously looked like a set of shuriken on the top shelf. She looked at the group of people

who were standing on the wall to her far left and forced herself to swallow the lump on her throat. The consequences of her actions just sunk on to her as she stared at them then at the wall again lined with weapons.<p>

'So, how are we going to do this, Kondo? It's your idea after all,' Hijikata asked, his glare not leaving the girl standing awkwardly in the middle of the room.

'Ahâ€|ahâ€|I guess we should ask her to show us her skills?' their leader offered unhelpfully.

'Yeah, well you can't actually gauge that until you see her in an actual battle. How will we do that? She's going to get hurt one way or another,' Harada said, running his eyes over the girl's form. She looked so fragile he almost felt worried for her.

'Hey, Heisuke, fight her,' Shinpachi nudged the guy standing beside him. 'You're almost the same height after all. I doubt she will get hurt that much if you take her on.'

'What?! No way! And what the hell are you trying to imply!' Heisuke shot back, kicking his friend on the shins.

'Shut up, you two! Focus on the situation!' Hijikata called out before the bickering got worse.

'Let Saito go for her. Maybe he won't scare her that much,' Harada said, looking at Saito who is as calm as ever.

'I am not going to fight a girl,' he said it with finality.

There was a collective sigh and shifting from the captains as they all stared at Akane who looked no more dangerous than a lost child in the middle of room.

'Ah, this is getting boring. She's the one who asked to go here. That means she's ready to get hurt, right?' Souji drawled with his signature lazy tone. He has spent the past few minutes studying her but he just can't seem to figure out the thing that was nagging him. There is certainly something strange about her. He just can't put his finger into it.

'Then I suggest you try her out, Souji,' Sannan mildly commented from beside him. Souji looked up and saw his companions looking at him expectantly.

'What? Me? You really want me to fight her?'

'Uhâ€|I don't think that's a good idea. Unless you want her to end up in a bloody messâ€|' Heisuke trailed off uncertainly.

'I'm just saying that we need to test her out properly. There's no better way to do that than to pit her against one of our best, right? And just like what Souji said, she came here knowing the consequences.'

'Butâ€|'

'He won't go easy on her, Sannan-san,' Hijikata mumbled beside

him.

The man smiled at him. 'Just the way we need it to be.'

Souji looked at his companions who all stared back at him anxiously. Finally, he sighed and pushed off from his leaning position on the wall.

'Fine. You clean up the mess afterwards.'

\* \* \*

><p>'Hey, kitty. Looks like I'm going to be the one who'll fight you after all.'<p>

Akane looked up to see the man who captured her walking to the middle of the room. He stopped a few feet away from her, an arrogant smile gracing his face.

'Perfectly fine with me,' she said, commanding herself for the steadiness of her voice despite of the fear she was feeling. Out of all of them, why do they have to give me the most sadistic one? The man called Souji just grinned even wider at her as if he can see through her facade.

'I'll give you 10 seconds to choose your weapon. Time starts now,' he said, his hand moving to the hilt of his sword.

She found herself frozen on the spot as she processed what he said. A good five seconds have already passed when she finally had the sense to run to the weaponry which was still five or so feet away from her. She felt her blood freeze in the middle of her run. She won't be able to make it.

'3, 2, 1.'

Akane has just pulled out a short sword from its sheath when she felt a force hurtling towards her. She turned around just in time to block the sword, the sound of metal hitting against metal echoing in her ears. She was forced to step back a little as Souji tried to push her against the wall. Dear Lord, he was strong.

She was in the middle of making another step backwards when Souji lifted his sword and struck her from the opposite direction. Instincts made her drop her body and flatten herself on the ground, the sword of her attacker making a deadly swishing noise on the air where her head was just a few seconds ago. She rolled away from him and pushed herself off the floor, putting as much distance between them as much as possible.

'Running away, kitty?'

She gritted her teeth at his remark. She was already panting hard while he still looked relaxed as he positioned his sword again and charged at her.

This time, she never backed down. She met him and struck her weapon against his sword when he was less than three feet away to stop him from getting the advantage of putting his force on her again. The last thing she needs was to be cornered on the wall again. The gasps

of the men from the other wall briefly registered to her as she used all of her strength to force him back. She thought she even heard Heisuke shout a support to her.

'So you do have a fight in you, huh?' Souji said, his lips slowly starting to form a smirk. She noticed how his eyes changed. As if he just started to take her seriously after her attack. That's when she knew she was in real trouble.

Akane jumped back just in time as Souji moved his sword and swiped it near her stomach. He is no doubt aiming for the kill now. She needs to do something if she wants to get out of this alive. Then she saw what she was looking for at the weapons shelf, partly hidden between the swords and the spears. All she needs to do is to get there to get that inkling of chance. The only problem is that she needs to get through Souji first.

'Keep your eyes on me, girl,' Souji said, swinging another deadly attack. This time, he was finally able to get a swipe of her arm. Akane flinched as she felt the burning pain on her skin. She saw the man aiming to attack again so she ran to the side as far as she can, trying to go as close to the weapons shelf as much as possible, and took hold of her short sword. Then she threw it at him with as much force as she can muster before he can make another step towards her.

Her actions gained a few shouts from the men watching them. Throwing your only weapon away when you're against a skilled samurai? The perfect foolish move for someone who eagerly wants to die. Thankfully, he did not also anticipate the move so he wasn't able to duck in time to avoid the sword. The blade got the sleeve of his robe, pinning it against the wall. He looked at it in an almost curious way before wrapping his hand on its handle to pull it off.

That was all the distraction Akane needed. She rushed to wall, grabbed hold of the bow and an arrow and nocked. Souji has just finished removing the knife when she pulled and released the string, the arrow whizzing through the air. She closed her eyes, not having the courage to see whether she will hit him or not. She was better at archery than using the sword so she knew it was her last chance. If she fails, she knew she will end up losing this fight.

And probably her life.

She waited for any sound, not even making an effort to open her eyes.

'Akane wins.'

Those two words made her finally open her eyes in surprise. The last thing she saw was Souji looking a little shocked but impressed as he stared at the arrow that landed just a few inches from his head. Then her vision was blurred by a tangle of long brown hair and a massive body. Heisuke and Shinpachi have attacked her, ruffling her hair and shaking her arm.

'You've beaten him! You've really beaten that crazy man!'

'I can't believe it! Hey Hijikata! Let's keep her! Let's keep

her! '

Souji approached them, the arrow clutched on his left hand. She almost cowered behind the two men who were still shouting and harassing her. Then he reached out his hand, offering her the arrow that saved her life.

'Did not expect you to use two weapons there,' he cocked his brow at her, a mischievous look on his face.

'I had to. You were going to kill me.'

He chuckled.

'Well, congratulations.'

That took her by surprise.

'Th-thanks!' '

He turned and started walking away, the blunt blade of his sword resting on his shoulder.

'Oh, and one more thing!' he said, looking back at her.

'Yes?'

'This doesn't mean I will not kill you in the future. You've made me really, really curious, kitten,' he said a little threateningly before winking and smirking at her.

She found herself wondering what she has gotten herself into again.

## 5. Chapter 5: A Welcome to the Brotherhood

A/N: hello, hello again! here's another chappie for you. Since I'm really new to writing here i'm not really familiar with the average length of time I should be posting my chapters. Somehow I feel like I update too soon and may come off as too eager (weird, right?). Is that bad? Anyway, there's not much Souji awesomeness in this chapter but I had to get this off so that I can start on the real story. Hope it won't disappoint you! And I want to thank **\*\*onlyheavenknows\*\*** and **\*\*allylovesedward\*\*** for your awesome reviews! I get fired up every time I read them. Thanks also to those who followed and favorited the story as well as those who left their reviews in the first few chapters. Because of all of you I feel like I'm not talking to the air with my story. thanks for the support! :)

\* \* \*

><p>'There. The cut is not deep so you don't need to worry.'<p>

'Thank you. Uhh!' '

'I'm Genzaburo Inoue. You can call me Gen-san.'

'Thank you very much Gen-san.'

Akane patted the bandage on her arm. The wound was still stinging a little but the bleeding has already stopped. In a few days, she will be able to get rid of the wraps. She looked at the kind faced, middle-aged man in front of her who is currently putting back the first aid materials in a box. His eyes were solemn and there was a small smile on his lips. He looked so calm, steady, and paternal. As if he is the first real person she has ever encountered ever since she woke up in that river. The river...She felt a dull ache in her chest as the gravity of the situation sunk into her. She still doesn't have any idea why she is here but the nearest, albeit craziest reason, she can think of is that she has somehow time traveled to the era of samurais. It seemed impossible. But for someone who can hear voices in her head and is claimed to be a descendant of demons? Well, maybe not really.

The thing that bothers her the most, however, is the state of her friends. If Rika and Suzume are also here, that means they can be in terrible danger this very moment. Kyoto was not really a safe place during this period and as far as she knows, the two are not exactly fighters who can defend themselves in the face of danger. She has to find a way to get out of this place and look for them as soon as possible.

'Akane-san?'

She looked up in surprise.

'I'm sorry, what?'

Gen-san chuckled good naturedly at her.

'The others are waiting for you. Let's go.'

Unsure of what is happening; she stood up and followed the man out of the room. The building was of ancient Japanese structure and she found herself glancing down at her clothes after taking in the surroundings. She must have looked so out of place with her sneakers and skinnies.

Gen-san turned a corner and stopped at a door. He gave her another smile, bowed, and left. She stared at his retreating back in confusion until a voice from behind shook her thoughts.

'Ah. The warrior princess is finally here.'

Akane turned to see the red-haired captain called Harada looking down pleasantly at her. He was holding a bottle of sake and a cup on his hand.

'Come on. The party is just getting started,' he said, taking hold of her arm and pulling her forward.

'W-waitâ€!' she said as he opened the door and gently pushed her inside. She looked around to find the captains all seated and drinking. She visibly paled when they stopped and caught sight of her.

'Akane-chan! You're here! Come, come, you have to celebrate with us!'

the short, brown-haired man who she knew to be Shinpachi stood up and approached her a little dizzily. He put his right arm around her and lifted the cup he was holding in his left hand.

'Everyone, let's give a round of applause to Akane!' he shouted cheerfully. His words were already a little slurred and his face was slightly red. He must have drunk a fair amount of alcohol already, she thought.

Harada, Heisuke, and Kondou chuckled and clapped their hands.

'Shinpachi, stop harassing the girl and sit down,' the vice-captain, Hijikata chastised his drunk ally who laughed and pushed her slightly down the mat to a sitting position. She looked at the gathered men around her and gulped.

'How is your wound?' Kondou asked. He looked genuinely worried. A flash of pain shot through her as an image of her father blazed in her mind.

'Fine! The wound is shallow so there's nothing to worry about!' she answered softly.

'That's good. Ah! well,' he looked at Hijikata who is seated beside him looking as serious as ever.

'We want you to answer a few questions,' he said, his amethyst eyes boring into her brown ones.

'H-hai,' she nodded nervously.

'You said you followed us to the forest earlier. Did you see the men we were pursuing?'

Akane did not really see the people they were fighting earlier but the sounds of their voices gave her an idea about who-or what- they are. She did not read that book countless times for nothing.

'Hai,' she answered, this time more determined than the last. If she was going to play this game, she'll make sure she'll play it well.

Hijikata, Kondou, and the bespectacled man beside them looked at each other. She balled her fists on the hem of her shirt.

'You're not going to kill me for that, will you?' she asked with fake courage. Hijikata only stared at her for a few seconds.

'We should actually be killing you right now,' he finally said.

'You said I can join you if I prove myself worthy. You gave me your word.'

Her last sentence caused him to look slightly uncomfortable, his eyes undecided. She knew Hijikata is a man of honor. He is a strict leader and a faithful follower of rules. But she also knew that he respects women and knows how to stick to his word.

'We can't really decide on that right now. I don't mean any

disrespect but letting a female join usâ€|' the man with the glasses trailed off. She figured him to be Keisuke Yamanami, or Sannan to his friends, the director of the Shinsegumi. He serves as the brain, advisor, and strategist of the group.

'I can disguise as a boy,' she blurted out, not really knowing where the idea came from. She knew her ancestor, Chizuru, used that tactic to stay with them during her time. Maybe it will help her get through this too.

She heard a short laugh from her left and saw Okita sitting lazily against the wall, his sword leaning against his left shoulder. He smirked at her, causing her eyes to flash in anger.

'You really think you can pull that off?' he asked, his green eyes grazing down her body. She felt heat rise on her face as his eyes rested on her chest. The button down she was wearing was a little fit against her body and she suddenly wished she'd worn her usual sweaters. She decided to ignore him and looked back at Sannan.

'I am serious. I can do it. I'm a decent fighter. I even managed to defeat your first captain, right?' she said the last line with a little venom in her voice.

'Your tactics are impressive though you seem to be having a hard time handling the swordâ€|' Sannan said, his expression neutral. She felt her heartbeat drum a little faster in her chest. If she wants to live, he's the one she has to convince.

'I can do archery. I'm an expert with the bow. I can serve as your archer during your missions.'

Kondou and Hijikata stared at Sannan, waiting for his decision. She knew the two won't hurt her but there is something about the bespectacled advisor that tells her she will be in trouble if he decides not to keep her. She knew him to be a kind and intelligent man. So intelligent that sometimes he sacrifices a couple of things for the expense of what he thinks is good.

'That may be a good idea,' she turned around and was surprised to see the dark-haired man with the long hair speak from the other side of the wall. His stoic expression and graceful, subdued movements told her he's Saitou Hajime, the captain of the third division.

'You think so, Saitou?' Harada asked.

'Yes. Having an archer can give us a lot of fighting advantage. Being followers of the sword, we are not really equipped to do long-range fights. She can climb a tree, be our lookout, and take care of the enemies we can't see from afar. It will save us a lot of trouble,' he explained in a business-like manner.

The men looked at each other, absorbing what he said.

Hijikata nodded. 'He has a point. She can be an advantage to us,' he said to Sannan.

The man kept silent, seeming to think things through. Finally, he said, 'That may be a good idea. However, we have to keep her gender a secret to our troops. It's not that we don't believe in your

capabilities Akane-san. But it may be dangerous for you if some of the men here discover your gender.'

She nodded, feeling the stitch in her chest loosen up a little. 'I will disguise as a guy. I promise I won't make any mistake.'

'Are you sure you really want this life, Akane-san? It is a tough one for a girl,' Kondou looked at her with kind eyes. In that moment, she saw the reason why the other people in the room hold him in such high regard. It's because of the kindness in his heart.

She found herself smiling warmly up at him. 'Yes, sir. I am sure.'

'Yes! So can we keep her?!" Heisuke asked cheerfully.

Hijikata sighed.

'Yes, I guess.'

'Yeeeeeeeees!' Heisuke and Shinpachi shouted in unison, toasting their sake cups before chugging their contents.

'But. You have to keep the things you saw earlier a secret,' Hijikata said, looking sharply at her again. 'It is top-secret information and only some of the highest officers in the group know of it. If we find any information about it leaking, we will automatically consider you as the perpetrator and won't have any choice but toâ€'

'Kill you,' Okita finished the sentence for him and looked at her with a mischievous light in his green eyes. Akane turned her gaze away from them before they can affect her.

'Yes. I promise I won't say anything.'

'Good. Now we have to assign you to a division,' Hijikata said, all business again.

'Put her in mine! I'll take care of her!"

'No! Our division can use a girl!"

'Hey, spare her from these two maniacs and put her in mine instead!'

Akane stared dumbfounded at Harada, Heisuke, and Shinpachi who started shouting all at the same time. The situation almost seemed funny to her if only she was not that afraid of the aspect of being placed under the supervision of one of the captains.

'Cut it out!' Hijikata yelled, effectively shushing the three.

'Saitou, take her under your wing. Even though she will be using the bow as her primary weapon, I want you to train her using the sword. I noticed earlier she used her left hand so you are the best teacher for her.'

'Understood,' Saitou said and looked at her with serious eyes. He scared her, yes. But at least he doesn't look like he'll kill her in her sleep like Okita.

'Please take care of me,' she said, bowing a little towards his direction.

'Now, enough of the serious things! It's time to drink! Akane, try this sake, it's Kyoto's best. We bought it especially for this occasion,' Shinpachi offered her a cup and she reached out for it a little hesitantly.

'Uh, what are we celebrating again?' she asked, eyeing the white liquid. She's not much of a drinker and the last thing she wants is to end up drunk in her first day as a member of the Shinsengumi.

'Your victory against Souji of course!' Heisuke said, putting down his cup with force for emphasis. 'It's not every day we see his ass kicked like that. Let alone by a girl!' he laughed, seemingly oblivious of the sharp stare that the man threw him.

'Eh? But I'm sure she'll give me a chance to fight her again, right kitten? You wouldn't be so mean as to deny me that,' he said slyly, training his eyes on her instead. She stared at him for a moment, coldness washing through her. Somehow, she felt like she has unwittingly done something that placed her neck deep in trouble.

\_Great. Now the sadist is after me.\_

She threw her head back and drank.

## 6. Chapter 6: A New Breed of Horror

A/N: Hi everyone! Sorry it took me a while to update. I was neck deep in work during the past few days. Actually, I'm still not finished yet but this story was bugging me so much so I decided to write it first. I just can't concentrate when I badly want to write something and tries to do another thing. I hope you enjoy this one. It's pretty long and I hope you won't get bored. I want to thank all of you for the support! every time i see a new review, i get so inspired to write more! anyway, I want to ask you guys a question. I was thinking of adding a sort of love triangle angle to this story. I'm not really planning to make it a hardcore love triangle. I just want to have another guy that Okita can be jealous of \*wink, wink\*. So I want to ask all of you who you want to make me use. Hijikata is not included in the options okay? he belongs to Chizuru. haha. just tell me your votes in the comments. Thank you! :)

\* \* \*

><p>Akane ran her fingers over the plain white kimono and black hakama that was delivered to her room by Gen-san an hour ago. She woke just before dawn to take a bath at the communal bathroom to prevent any encounters from any members of the group. She has just closed the door of her room after a relaxing albeit short wash when she heard a soft knock on her door. The middle-aged man seemed to have heard her moving in the hallways and read her intentions so he decided to give her her new wardrobe early on.<p>

An hour later and Akane still hasn't done anything more than run her hands over her new uniform. She had barely slept and spent the whole

night mulling over the things that has happened. The plane crash, her friends, her impossible time-travel, and now her membership to the Shinsengumi. She still wasn't able to keep up and process everything that has happened yet. Will she ever find her friends? Are they even still alive in the first place? Will she be stuck in this time forever?

She sighed and looked at the small mirror on the wall. She looked pale and thin, her long black hair hanging lifelessly on her shoulders. The room given to her was small and almost bare. It didn't have any furnishings except for a low table, a tatami mat, an average sized closet, and a mirror. It was so different from the one she had at home. Akane chastised herself and forced herself to stop dwelling over the concept of 'home' before she got depressed again. Right now, what she has to figure out is how to make herself look like a boy.

Two hours later, she threw a roll of bandage on the wall with a frustrated growl and collapsed on her mat.

You know those chick flick shows where the protagonist decides to disguise as a guy and simply changes her clothes & cuts her hair to convince everyone that she's a man? They're impossible. They're definitely.\_ Not. Possible\_.

Akane rolled to her side and found herself staring at the mirror again. She is already wearing the hakama, the kimono hanging loosely on her shoulders. The way it perfectly fitted surprised her when she first tried it on. It wasn't too tight and loose around her chest and shoulders. Still, her breasts left a noticeable bump on her front. She was just about to panic when she found a roll of bandages beneath the light robe Gen-san has given her. She picked it up and rolled it between her hands. She nearly wanted to kiss the man for his foresight.

Two hours later, she's now lying in the mattress, irritated and aching. Putting the bandage was one hell of a difficult task as she found it so hard to disguise the bulge in her chest. Akane knew she isn't someone with a remarkable body. At 17, she has a slight figure that made her look younger than her age. She took ballet and traditional Japanese dance lessons when she was young until she got into her first year of junior high. All the training made her bone structure look too thin and frail to pass for a boy. Her lack of killer curves, however, did not stop the bandage from either ending up with one of its ends slipping or choking her to death.

\_ 'You really think you can pull it off?' \_

Akane found herself mentally shivering as the first captain's remark last night echoed in her mind. The way he studied her made her blush and she shook her head, trying to shake away the image of his lazy smirk that flashed on her mind. She pushed herself up and stomped towards the bandage, muttering to herself. She dropped to the floor into a sitting position facing the mirror, unrolled it and decided to try again. She won't give that weird man a reason to make fun of her today. Oh no, she won't.

\* \* \*

><p>Okita yawned as he pulled on his robe. He usually wakes up

mid-morning whenever he doesn't have cooking responsibilities but today; he has agreed to spar with Saitou as a way of demonstration to some members of his squad.<p>

'Oy, good morning Souji,' he looked up and saw Harada still looking ruffled with sleep. He was also pulling on his sky blue robe, his spear on his left hand.

'Early morning patrol?' he asked the red-haired captain. 'Breakfast still isn't ready yet.'

'Ah, yeah. Hijikata asked me to check on a site. There was a murder last night. It was causing quite a ruckus because the innards of the victim were all over the road.'

'Innards? Do they have a suspect?' he asked, suddenly alert.

'The police are still clueless but we have our hunch,' Harada answered, his eyes equally serious. 'The guards said no one left the headquarters last night though so there is a chance that the killer is not from us.'

'The killer not being from us presents a bigger problem, I think.'

'Exactly.'

The two fell silent, thinking of the implications of both situations. Then they suddenly looked up at the same time when they heard gasps of pain from the room beside them.

'Ow! Ow! Ugh!'

Harada looked at him questioningly, his eyebrows raised. He shrugged his shoulders, also clueless.

'Stupid stupid. Ouchâ€|ohhhâ€|'

His head shot up when he finally recognized the voice. Then his lips quirked into a sly grin.

What a wonderful morning treat this is.

\* \* \*

><p>'Is there a reason why you're making sex noises in your room, kitten?'<p>

Akane gave a small squeak when she heard a familiar drawling voice just outside of her door. She whipped her head and saw two tall shadows outside.

'Uhâ€|are you okay, Akane-chan? Are you in pain?' Harada asked uncertainly. She clapped her hands to her cheeks as she felt herself blush.

'Ah, yes. Yes. I was just having trouble withâ€|' she looked at the bandage lying on the floor in front of her. How long have they been there?! She was concentrating too much on what she was doing that she wasn't able to hear them outside.

There was silence as the two waited for her answer.

'Trouble with what?' Harada asked again, concern in his voice now.  
'Can we help? I can come in now if you want.'

'NO! No you can't!' she nearly screamed.

'But you sound so pitiful!'

'I was just. I was just having trouble with my' she closed her eyes and steeled herself for what she was about to say. 'with my wardrobe.'

'With your wardrobe?' the captain asked again, clueless. 'Is it your first time wearing a kimono?'

'No. Of course not,' she said hastily. Why does he have to ask so much? 'My bandages! they're just hard to put on.'

'Why are you putting on bandages? Is your wound still bleeding? You can ask Gen-san to help you out.'

She moaned helplessly. Trying to explain more will definitely put her in more trouble. She was just praying for the ground to swallow her up when she suddenly heard Okita falling into a raucous fit of laughter.

'Oh! Oh, I know! Bandages!'

'I don't get it,' she heard Harada say.

'Why kitten, having trouble hiding your femininity?' she can almost taste the smirk in his voice as he said it.

'That is none of your business!' she retaliated.

'I told you it won't work,' he called in a sing-song voice.

'Stop it!'

'Femininity!' she heard Harada mutter from the other side of the door. 'Bandages! oh! OH,' Akane winced as he finally put two and two together. The three of them fell silent. They were probably visualizing her now. No, they are surely picturing her now doing it.

A crash sounded off from somewhere in the building.

'Oh, what's that! I think Heisuke is trying to tear the kitchen apart again! I guess I better check on him, huh?' the tenth division captain suddenly rambled off, clearly embarrassed of the situation and the way he offered to go in and help her earlier. 'I'll go ahead! Uh, and Akane?'

'Y-yes?'

'Um! goodluck. I'm sure you can do it,' she blushed and hid her face on her hands as she heard him escape. A soft chuckle from outside made her groan.

'Why are you still here?'

'I stay in this spot every morning after I wake up,' Okita answered playfully.

'Liar.'

'Hey.'

'What?' she moaned.

'You need help?'

'Go away!'

He walked away laughing his head off like a maniac. This is definitely a good start to his day.

\* \* \*

><p>Akane tightened the cloth on her waist and sighed heavily. The bandages were still not perfect but at least she was able to pull off a decent look after 50 or more trials. She opened the door of her room and looked around. It seems like the sadist has finally decided to leave her alone. She stepped on the hallway, giving her outfit one last look. She had pulled her hair into a ponytail and she adjusted the kimono a little to make it look looser on her body. This is as close as she'll be to looking like a man.</p>

From afar, she heard a battle cry and the unmistakable clanking of swords. Truth is, she doesn't have any idea what she has to do from now on. Seeing that there's nobody in sight that she can ask assistance from, she just decided to follow the sound.

What she saw in the expansive yard of the headquarters made her heart jump a little on her throat. Okita and Saitou were in the middle of a group of men dueling like the sword masters she read them to be. She was immediately entranced of their movements, the way they gracefully moved as if they were dancing, their swords flashing in the early sunlight. They looked like two pagan gods moving in tune to a mysterious rhythm, their movements sleek yet deadly and precise. They were obviously practicing but it was also clear that the two were both aiming for the kill.

Saitou was an image to behold but she couldn't help but focus on Okita. She can't believe that she fought that man. He looked so lethal in that yard right now, making her question herself how she won against him yesterday. She was concentrating too much on keeping herself alive in that duel that she was only able to appreciate his fighting style now.

One swift move and duck from him caught Saitou by surprise, giving him the chance to flick the blunt edge of his sword. The move sent the other man's weapon flying. The men surrounding them in a wide circle clapped their hands.

'You seem to be improving your technique,' Saitou said calmly, walking over and picking his sword from the ground.

'Nah. I'm just lucky today. My day started off well,' he answered, a proud smirk on his lips. Saitou simply stared at him.

'Just kidding. I'm a lot better than you so I won,' he grinned wider at him. He waited for his friend to give him his usual stoic nod but he was already staring at someone behind him.

'You're late,' the third division captain said. He looked around and saw Akane standing on top of the stairs leading to the yard. He blinked a couple of times at the sight of her. She has finally ditched her weird clothes and was wearing normal Japanese garb. She looked so different with her hair pulled back from her face. Her face was fragile and heart-shaped and her light brown eyes looked clear and innocent. She went down the stairs gracefully and approached their group cautiously. He found himself running his eyes over her and a malicious smile tugged on his lips. Ah. So the girl was able to find a way to put the bandages on.

'I'm sorry. I just had some trouble this morning,' she said, bowing an apology to Saitou. She seems to be intentionally avoiding his eyes.

'Please try to come on time starting tomorrow. You have missed an important part of today's training,' Saitou said.

'Hai.'

Saitou turned to look at his squad. Akane looked at the people in front of her, trying her best to look confident.

'Everyone, he's a new member that we just recently recruited. He will be joining our squad from now on,' a murmur of acknowledgement from the small group of people ascended. Saitou looked at Akane as if expecting her to do something.

'Ah. It's nice to meet all of you. I am looking forward to working with all of you. I'm Aka-,' she stopped as she heard Okita clear his throat beside her. Then she remembered.

'I'm Akira. Please take care of me,' she bowed in respect. When she straightened up, she saw him watching her in her peripheral vision. He still had the sly smile on his face that seems to say he knows something that the others don't. It made her uncomfortable but she felt thankful that he did not give any remarks that may give away her true identity in front of all these people.

'Okita! Saitou!' she looked around and saw Heisuke running towards them. His hair was still down and he looked as if he just woke up. She gave him a smile when he caught sight of her. 'Oh! You're here! You look very beauâ€" Ow! What was that for?!"

Okita hit Heisuke's head with the wooden sheath of his sword even before he can finish.

'Heisuke, why don't you say a proper good morning to our new comrade? It's Akira's first day after all,' he smiled at him, his eyes squinted dangerously as he emphasized her new name. Thankfully, the younger captain seemed to have gotten the message.

'Ahâ€"good morning Akira! You look very handsome today! Ahahahaha!'

he said uncomfortably, his hand massaging the top of his head.

'Is there something you want to tell us?' Saitou asked.

'Ah! Yes, yes! Hijikata-san called for a meeting. He said it was urgent. Ah, Akira, he said you should go with us too.'

Akane looked up at Saitou questioningly. She knew that only those in the higher ranks are allowed to participate in meetings.

'Let's go then,' Saitou said, gracefully pushing his sword into its sheath. She followed him as he went towards the building, Okita and Heisuke behind her.

When they finally reached the room, Akane swore she can cut the tension inside it with a knife. She sat down next to her captain and waited in silence uncomfortably. Kondou was staring at his tea cup with his eyebrows furrowed while Sannan was drinking his tea as calmly as ever. Hijikita looked even more serious, his hands balled into fists on his lap.

It took a while before he finally spoke.

'We received news this morning about a murder not so far away from here. The victim was a middle-aged woman who went home late from her shop. Her innards were ripped away from her body. There was no sign of any weapon used on her. Her flesh seemed to have been torn apart by something sharp yet ragged.'

The group remained silent. Akane tried to stop herself from squirming in her seat as she processed the details of the murder.

'I asked Harada to check the site of the murder,' Hijikata continued. 'There was one thing he noticed on the body.'

'What is it?' Okita asked.

'It was drained of blood.'

The tension seemed to have become thicker.

'According to our guards, they were sure that nobody slipped away from the headquarters last night. The murderer was not someone from our group.'

'But if it is not one of our men who drank the medicine, then who?' Shinpachi asked.

Hijikata stared hard at the floor for what seemed like a whole half minute.

'That means another person is trying out the medicine on other people. There is a different group of rascals out there that we have no total control of.'

His sentence earned a gasp from Shinpachi and Heisuke. Harada looked worried, Saitou withdrawn as he processed that bit of information. Only Okita and Hijikata, Akane noticed, looked glum and alert.

'What's our plan of action?' Okita asked in a serious tone. She was surprised, however, when Hijikata looked straight at her.

'Akane, I hope you're ready for your first mission.'

## 7. Chapter 7: Blood Covered Princess

A/N: Hi! here's another chapter for you. I must say it took me a very long time to write this. It was really hard! I want to thank all of those who leave reviews. Especially to allylovesedward and chikagefan. Cheers also to Suzumori, Redstar8, and Sakura Otome. You all who gave their votes on the character i should use for the love triangle thingy. Right now, here are the results:

Heisuke: 2 Harada: 1 Yamazaki: 1 Sannan: 1

So I'm going to wait for a little while more for more votes to come until I write the next chapter. Hope you all enjoy this one. It's sort of full of action and it's my first time writing something like this so I hope I don't fall short of your expectations. P.S. Don't forget to tell me what you think!

\* \* \*

><p>Akane plucked the string of her bow with her index finger, testing it if it's in the right level of tightness. Though she has started training in archery using a wooden bow, she was more used in using those made of steel since they are the ones she uses during competitions. The one given to her now was a wooden longbow which is a lot lighter than the one she usually trains with. Its weight is both an advantage and disadvantage to her so she spent the past two hours practicing alone in the training room, trying to get the hang of it.</p>

Satisfied with the string, she picked up the quiver and started examining each and every arrow there. She knew she was being a little overkill but it was her own way of dealing with all the pressure she's facing. Just barely 48 hours ago, her biggest problem was how to pack all the clothes she will be bringing to her trip to Hawaii. Now, she is holding a bow and an arrow, wearing samurai clothes, and will be going to battle in three hours. She rolled an arrow between her fingers and tried to focus at the task at hand. She sighed and rehashed the conversation that happened that morning.

\_ 'Normally, I wouldn't ask someone so new in the group to join these kinds of things. But right now, this case is only known to the people in this room and we need as much men with us as possible,' Hijikata looked at her with a mixture of seriousness and guilt.\_

\_ 'I understand.' \_

\_ 'If it will make you feel better, you need not walk with us. We just need you as our watcher.' \_

\_ 'I can do more if you think there are other ways I can be helpful.' \_

\_ 'No. I wouldn't be able to sleep if something happens to you anyway. Kondou-san is already against this as he is,' the vice-captain looked

at the man beside him who finally looked up and smiled at her apologetically. \_

\_ 'I'm so sorry, Akane-chan.' \_

\_ 'Ah...Noâ€| I'd be glad to help. I wanted this anyway.' \_

\_ 'We'll have Yamazaki assist you. He'll be watching the other side of the road tonight.' \_

\_ A soft scratching noise from the other side of the door signaled the presence of the group's special intelligence officer. Yamazaki Susumu, the group's captain of watch and medic entered the room and sat beside her silently. Akane can't help but be amazed at how stealthy he moves. He gave her a slight bow. \_

\_ 'Nice to meet you, Akane. I'm Yamazaki.' \_

\_ She simply smiled at him, wondering how he knew her name.

\_

\_ Hijikata looked around the group, addressing them in the tone that he strictly uses for serious matters. 'Yamazaki heard a group of men in a dingy okiya near north talking about a plan of attack on one of neighboring towns here. He said one of them can be the suspect of the murder that happened early this morning. Harada, if you can please look at something he has brought with him.' \_

\_ Harada rose from his seat and approached the young man who produced something from his pocket. It was a ripped piece of blue cloth with yellow diamond patterns.\_

\_ 'I snatched this from one of those men when they were already way too drunk. They've been brandishing it like a flag all morning,' he said, offering the piece to Harada.\_

\_ 'This is the pattern of the kimono of the dead woman,' the tenth division captain said after examining the cloth for a while.\_

\_ 'Are you sure?' Hijikata asked.\_

\_ 'Yes.' \_

\_ 'Then we can safely assume that one of the men in this group is the one we are looking for and that they're planning to commit a massacre tonight,' he turned towards Yamazaki, 'Do you know where they are headed?' \_

\_ 'From the directions and streets they were talking about, it seems to be the south of the Higashiyama district, near the steps of Ninenzaka. There were 6 of them in the pub earlier but they were talking about 'inviting the others' so we should expect more of them. They said they will roam on midnight.' \_

\_ 'I see,' the vice-captain said, his eyes ablaze with a kind of light Akane had always imagined him to have whenever she read about him. He looked at each and every one in the room, his gaze seemingly giving a silent, unbreakable order.\_

\_ 'We leave an hour before midnight,' he simply said before dismissing

all of them.\_

\* \* \*

><p>'Akane.'</p>

Akane was brought back to the present at the sound of her name. She looked around and saw Saitou standing behind her, a slightly worried look on his face.

'I called you five times already,' he said.

'Oh, sorry. I was just thinking of some things,' she answered, embarrassed. He was still looking at her with the odd concerned look. Finally, he sighed and sat down next to her.

'Hijikata-san asked me to talk to you.'

'About what?'

He looked at her briefly sideways then stared at the yard again.

'He seems to be under the impression that you're a little stressed about tonight.'

She kept silent and stared at the night sky sprinkled with stars. Well she can't really disagree with that, right? It's not every day that she has to battle from where she came from.

'Have you ever killed anyone?'

Akane's surprise at the question caused her to stare at her captain, open-mouthed.

'I'm sorry?' she asked, thinking she heard wrong.

Saitou remained calm-faced as he stared ahead. His hair was blowing in the wind and there was a faraway look in his eyes. Though he looked barely a couple of years older than her, he still seemed like someone who is a thousand years wiser.

'You will probably kill someone tonight. The possibility of having your first kill is not an easy fact to process.'

She stared at him, completely stunned at how perfect he was able to express her feelings in words. She was trying her best not to overthink the chance of her ending another person's life but his statement shot straight to the lump of fear in her heart. She swallowed and looked at the yard again.

'Yes. It will be my first tonight, if ever,' Akane felt his eyes on her face. They stayed silent like that for a minute or so before he finally looked away from her.

'You don't need to do it. It's not really needed. Nobody will put it past you,' he said in his usual voice. When she first heard him speak, Akane thought Saitou was one of those people who have the talent of always speaking in the same, expressionless voice regardless of the situation. Sitting beside him tonight, however, she was sure she heard a tone of gentleness in his tone.

'I don't want to be useless,' she answered in a soft voice.

'Hijikata-san gave you the order to be our watcher. Nothing more. Being your captain, I expect you to follow that.'

The finality in his voice made the complaints in her throat die. She simply nodded. He seemed to have seen her because he finally stood up from his seat. She knew he is not a man of many words. He always took the shortest and surest route in everything he did. Despite of this, she felt thankful that he was her captain. She needed someone like him to guide her through this madness. Akane picked up one of the arrows again absent-mindedly and flipped it like a baton between her fingers, expecting him to leave.

'Here.'

She started a little as she looked around him in surprise. On his outstretched hand is a roll of red ribbon. She reluctantly took it and looked at it blankly.

'Tie it on all your arrows. When you see someone suspicious from your position above, strike. You don't need to target their vital parts. A hit on the shoulder is already enough. The flash of color will help point us to the direction where you've shot it. We'll take it from there.'

Akane's eyes widened at the implication of his words. She was about to say something but when she looked up, he has already turned away.

'Waitâ€"'

He did not look back but said,

'If you want to thank someone, go to Souji. It was him who suggested the idea.'

\* \* \*

><p>Akane shifted the quiver on her back a little uncomfortably and peeked secretly at the man walking beside her. Okita was wearing his usual Shinsengumi uniform, his right hand casually resting on the hilt of his sword hanging on his waist. He looked serious tonight. She unconsciously touched a red ribbon tied on one of her arrows. Akane wanted to thank him but somehow, she suddenly felt intimidated of him tonight.<p>

'Is there something you want to say?' he suddenly said. She looked at him, startled. He was looking down at her with a questioning look in his green eyes.

'Umâ€|'

'You've been sneaking glances at me ever since we left the headquarters and you've been fidgeting like crazy.'

She stared at him and willed herself to say the two words she wanted to tell him ever since her talk with Saitou. She stopped, however,

when he gave her his usual smirk.

'Finally fallen in love with me, huh?'

Well that shook her from her reverie. Unfortunately, it also made her blush.

'You idiot,' she muttered and stared at the ground.

He simply chuckled.

'Akane, this is your spot,' Saitou, who is walking a little ahead of them suddenly stopped, his gaze on a low fig tree positioned on the side of the street. It was concealed in the shadows of the liquor shop beside it.

'Yes, sir,' she said and headed towards it. Heisuke and Harada who were also part of their team tonight followed her.

'You need help climbing that, Akane-chan?' Heisuke called to her as she slung her bow over her shoulder and took hold of the tree's bark.

'No thanks, I'm okay,' she smiled and hoisted herself off the ground. She took hold of the lowest branch and agilely lifted herself higher. She's a pro when it comes to climbing trees after all those climbing she did on the sakura tree on her yard when she was still a child. It did not take her long to finally reach the highest branch which was just thick enough to support her bottom. She moved her body left and right to find her most comfortable position. After a while, she finally gave an OK hand sign to the boys below her.

Harada gave a low whistle, 'This girl is unbelievable.'

'Yeah. She's a better climber than I am,' Heisuke answered, his mouth a little open.

'You wouldn't think she came from this time, right?' Souji slyly quipped from behind them with a mysterious grin on his face.

'Let's go. It's time,' Saitou called after the three. He looked at Akane and said, 'Do your best.'

'Hai.'

Souji stared at her for a little while before following his friends. She looked small and fragile sitting on the highest branch of the tree. He smirked at her.

\_Do you job well, kitten. \_

Akane stared at him for a couple of seconds. As if she read his thoughts, she gave him a nod.

\* \* \*

><p>Almost fifteen minutes had already passed since she climbed the tree and an ominous fog has already descended on the streets. Thankfully, she can still see her captain and the others steadily and slowly moving forward, their light blue figures contrasting sharply

against the dark. Pushing through from the other side is Hijikata's team who took a shortcut earlier to go to the other side of the road. Shinpachi, Sannan, and Kondou were with him with Yamazaki acting as their watcher. The two groups were moving from both directions towards the Ninenzaki steps. The plan was to corner the group of attackers in the middle so that they can centralize the fighting to one spot only. The boys stopped their advance as they reached their designated spot located at the fringes of the town.<p>

Akane steadied the arrow she has nocked on her bow and scanned the surroundings again. It's probably a little past midnight already and she felt uncomfortably on edge. She can see everything from her position though she hoped the fog would stop from thickening. If her hunch is correct, Saitou and the others can now only see a few metres ahead of them with the current state of visibility.

She squinted her eyes and stared harder now at the area ahead of them. Her nerves felt like they have been strung too tight and she can feel a weird tingling on the back of her neck. Then she saw it. A faint movement from beyond the fog. Someone was walking towards Okita and the others who seemed oblivious. Sweat was already trickling down her forehead but she refused to lose focus. Akane decided to wait a moment, checking to see if it is just a civilian going home late. Then, after a few moments, she saw the glowing red eyes.

She pulled her string and released her arrow.

\* \* \*

><p>Souji whipped his head as he saw a flash of bright red zoom past him from behind. His sword was out of its sheath in seconds. Around him, Saitou and Heisuke also pulled off their weapons and Harada had his spear poised for attack. From somewhere beyond, they can hear voices rising in panic. The fog was still blocking most of their vision but given the situation, they can use it to their advantage temporarily. He looked around and exchanged nods with his comrades. Then they started to silently jog towards the direction of the arrow.<p>

'We're under attack!'

'They have an archer! Take cover!'

Souji smirked at the stupidity of the men. Are they really expecting to escape with the racket of noise they're making?

He can now see shadows moving on the fog a few feet away from him. He pushed forward, swiping the man nearest him lethally on the neck. The body of his enemy barely touched the ground when another one attacked him from behind. He swerved and easily took him down after a hit on the shoulder to the chest. He was just briefly aware of the grunts around him as his comrades also slashed through their enemies. Barely four minutes later, there was only silence and seven or six bodies scattered on the ground.

'That's it?' Heisuke asked, swinging his sword to remove some of the blood on the blade. They looked around and squinted at the fog. They were just about to move forward when they heard an arrow slicing through air again followed by the undeniable flash of bright red.

'Looks like the fun isn't over yet,' Harada said. He was about to move ahead when a grunt of pain sounded from behind him. All four captains of the Shinsengumi whipped around and saw a man on his knees, an arrow planted between his shoulder blades. That was all that registered to them when they noticed, two, three, six more arrows raining around them followed by screams of agony.

They were surrounded.

\* \* \*

><p>Akane felt her arms aching as she released one arrow after the next. She panicked when she saw the first man heading towards Souji and the others from the other direction. They were certainly not expecting the enemies to come from the other side. Unlike the man she first shot, the new group seemed to be more monstrous with their glowing red eyes and fangs. Drool was flowing from their mouths and they looked manic. One was barely a few feet away from Harada when she finally managed to shoot him. Then they were suddenly all over the place and she found herself firing simultaneously, her arm whipping back and forth from the quiver on her back to the bowstring.</p>

Thankfully, Souji and the others seemed to have caught up with what's happening and were now dueling below her. Akane tried her best to injure as many of the men as possible to bring back the advantage on their side. There were about a dozen of the monsters screaming and slashing and she feared for the safety of her comrades below her. They were hacking and hitting at anyone that went in their way, hitting the vital parts of their enemies with precise blows. In a few more minutes, each and every one of the rasesus was on the ground, their dark, almost rust-colored blood covering the streets. The boys looked around their surroundings cautiously. Akane was also scanning every street and alley from her place. Somehow, she did not feel as if the trouble was over already.

She did a double take when she saw a darker shadow moving against the other shadows of the narrow alleys. It was speeding towards her group in the middle of the street with chilling silence. Her hand flew to her quiver to grasp for another arrow but gasped when she found it empty. She was just about to shout to signal them when she felt a hand clasp her mouth from behind.

'I'd appreciate it if you keep silent,' someone whispered from behind her. She instantly struggled and tried to move her head to see her captor's face. He merely laughed at her efforts darkly and tightened her grip on her mouth.

'If you don't stop struggling, I'll push you off this tree,' he moved her body a little as if to drop her. Akane grasped at the arm around her.

'No? Good girl. Now stay still and watch your friends die. They've already caused too much trouble tonight.'

She looked at Souji and the others who were still unconscious of the impending danger. She gave it 4 minutes max before the monster reaches them. She has to do something.

She stilled for a moment and made her body go slack against the person holding her. He noticed and said, 'Finally gave up?'

She nodded.

'Good. Now sit back and enjoy,' he mockingly whispered to her again. With a burst of energy, Akane, flung her body weight towards the ground. It took her captor by surprise though not enough for her to fully escape as he managed to take hold of the collar of her kimono before she totally fell off the tree. Her breath was brutally cut off her throat as the material of her top choked her. She flailed her arms and jerked her feet as wildly as she can to put him off balance. Her struggling finally got the best of him as he lost his grasp on her, causing her to fall 10 feet to the ground. Akane felt twigs and branches battering her body during her fall. Luckily, the ground was soft and a little muddy below so the force did not take the best of her when she finally hit it. She wasted no time and rolled over, bolting to the street before the man can catch her again.

Akane ran in full speed, the sound of her sandals thumping dully against the concrete. She tried to shout but no voice came out of her. The force on her neck earlier seemed to have damaged her larynx. She felt pure fear course through her body as she realized that she has no choice but to reach the boys' current location in order to save them.

\* \* \*

><p>Souji turned in a slow circle, trying his best to see in the fog that seemed to become denser and denser by the minute. The surroundings were utterly silent though he can't help but feel as if something is terribly wrong. Harada and Heisuke slowly retreated a few metres away from them, trying to cover as much width of the street as possible. They wouldn't want to be cornered all in one spot again. Finally, he heard footsteps rushing to their side from behind. His sword was ready in an instant but he put it down a little as he recognized Akane's small form clad in their light blue robe. He opened his mouth to ask why she left her position. It was dangerous for her to be here. Before he can speak, however, he felt the wind knocked out of him as she pushed him to the ground hard.</p>

He briefly registered her falling on top of him when he heard the snarl. The next thing he knew her face was twisted in pain and a rasetsu had sunk his teeth on her left shoulder.

'Akane!' he heard Harada and Heisuke shout in unison through the fog of shock in his mind. Something snapped inside him and he tried to move his hands to kill the beast but the girl had his arms pinned on the ground. He felt her grasp on him tighten as the monster on her back sunk his teeth deeper into her. He gritted his teeth. He can't move her right now.

'Hajime!' he shouted desperately. In a second, the beast was off her as Saitou ran his blade deeply through its back. Heisuke and Harada have also finally reached them and attacked. Akane collapsed on top of him.

'Akane. Akane!' he sat up and gently shook her in his arms. Deep red blood was blossoming on her left shoulder and there was a bright red mark around her throat as if she was choked. She was covered in

bruises and mud and did not seem to be capable of responding.

'Wake up!'

'Souji, we need to take her to the headquarters,' Saitou said urgently. He nodded and lifted her on his arms.

'Is she okay?' Heisuke asked, from beside him.

'I'm not sure,' he looked at the monster lying face first on the ground. 'Is it dead?'

'Yes,' It was Harada who answered. He gave the man a kick on the side for good measure.

'Let's go then.'

Akane felt her body turn light and feathery. She rolled her head and hit something hard and warm. She felt numb and incredibly sleepy but she managed to open her eyes and look up. The blurred face of Souji welcomed her eyes. She moved her head a little and squinted, trying to focus on him. Why is he looking so worried? His jaw was set and his eyebrows were furrowed. She tried raising her hand to smoothen the wrinkle between them. Her movement caused him to suddenly look down on her. His lips twisted in a rueful smile.

'You stupid girl. What were you thinking?' he asked softly.

She moved her head in question before she felt the last of her consciousness leave her. The last thing she heard was him murmuring softly above her.

'Rest for a moment, kitten. Don't worry, I'm here.'

\* \* \*

><p>He calmly walked over the dead bodies, his feet making squishing sounds on the blood covered concrete. They were failures as usual. He watched with a mixture of pure joy and anger as the robed fools hacked on them earlier. Being their creator, he should have felt bad for losing them. However, all he felt was relief as he watched the odd men clean up his mess for him. He can make more of them in the future anyway.</p>

He was just about to leave the scene when he found an unexpected treat in the form of a young girl on top of a tree holding a bow and arrow. He watched her for a moment and was slightly impressed at how good she is with her weapon. He found himself smiling in the dark and climbed the tree to get closer to her.

  Ah, so she's their watcher. Partly the reason why his men were so easily defeated tonight.  

He saw her slight form start and followed her eyes. One of his rasetsus was heading towards her friends. He cocked his head to the side as he watched her hand try to grab something from her empty quiver. The play of emotions over her face when she realized how hopeless the situation is amused him. Then he realized her plan as she readied to shout a warning and wrapped a hand around her mouth in an instant.

He can say that she was pretty strong for an average woman. She doesn't seem to hesitate with her movements and even foolishly tried to escape from him. He was having so much fun that he even allowed himself to talk to her. Just when he thought she had finally given up, however, he was surprised again when she flung herself off the branch they were sitting on. He tried to stop her from falling by getting hold of her collar. She was moving so much though that his hand slipped from the thin cloth he was using as an anchor. He watched with mild shock as she hit the ground, groaned, rolled over, and ran at full speed. How can a girl move like that? He was so confused and amazed at the same time to the point that he did not even try to catch her.

His curiosity was even more peaked when he watched her shove one of the men on the street and take the attack of his rasetsu. A few minutes later, he blended easily on the shadows and watched the man and his comrades run past, the girl almost unconscious on his arms.

He now poked his last fallen rasetsu with his foot. He saw three of the men slash at him earlier so he was startled when the man on the ground gave a soft groan. He nudged it and flipped the body to see its face. He watched in surprise as the man on the ground opened his blood red eyes and stared at him. His white hair turned black once more and his breathing became steadier. He squatted and looked at him closely. There were cuts on his chest, near his heart, on his neck, and on the sensitive part of his stomach. He felt his eyes widen in shock as he watched the wounds slowly heal and close up.

'M-Masterâ€|'

He snapped his head towards the man who spoke.

'How are you feeling?' he asked.

'The painâ€|it's fading awayâ€|' it answered, closing its eyes then opening them again.

He stared at its glowing red orbs. How can it be possible for a rasetsu who has finally lost control and turned mad to be normal again? How can the man in front of him now survive the cuts that have easily killed off the others?'

His eyes fell on the encrusted blood on its face.

Then it suddenly dawned on him.

\_The girl. And her blood. \_

'Looks like this night turned out to be a good one for me after all,' he said, a manic grin twisting his face.

## 8. Chapter 8: Manic Celebration

\_A/N: Hi! So we finally have a winner for our voting about the love triangle thingy. I'm sure you'll notice who it is in this chapter. I decided to make the story light this time because the last one I did

was really serious and a little brutal. Anyway, I want to thank everyone who leave comments! It's nice to hear people actually liking what you're doing. Welcome also to the new followers! Anyway, I'm going to introduce another OC this time. She was patterned from one of my most loyal reader/commenter, allylovesedward! so you all, give the new girl a round of applause! okay, shutting up now. Enjoy. :)\_

\* \* \*

><p><em>She was running through the woods. Blood was flowing from the bite in her neck and she clamped it with her hand in a hopeless gesture to stop the bleeding. She heard a manic laugh behind her and sped up her steps despite of the energy slowly dwindling off her system. Finally, she couldn't take it anymore and collapsed on the ground. <em>

\_She heard steps slowly approach her, like a predator taking its time to finally lunge at its prey. She didn't dare look back, afraid of what she might see. She balled her hands on the ground into fists and waited for death. \_

\_ 'Akane!' \_

\_She looked up at the sound of her name and the familiar voice that said it. Then she screamed. \_

\_Souji, his hair white and eyes red lunged at her for the kill.\_

'Akane? Akane!'

Akane opened her eyes, the scream trapped in her aching throat. She looked around wildly and saw Okita's face just a hand span away from hers. His hands were on her shoulders and he had a worried look on his face. She scuttled back in fear, his distorted image from her nightmare still vividly plastered on her mind. He seemed to have noticed her stress and didn't try to approach her. He put his hands down on his lap slowly and deliberately as if to show her that he doesn't mean her any harm.

'Are you okay?' he asked in a slow voice after waiting for her catch her breath. Akane tried to speak but nothing came out of her. Her throat felt dry and scratchy as if it has been squeezed and battered. Her body felt as if it has been pounded and her broken bones has just been put together. She nodded her head though.

She saw him visibly relax. She looked around, still feeling a little confused. The last thing she can remember is the wrenching pain on her shoulder and her looking down at Okita's shocked face. Now she is in her room and it looked like day outside. She looked down on herself and visibly blushed as she realized that she was just wearing a light kimono with the left sleeve hanging loosely. Her whole chest up to her shoulder was covered in bandages. She immediately crossed her arms in front of her and looked at the man sitting just a few feet away from her.

He snorted. 'What, you think I'll try to do something to you when you're in that condition?'

She just continued looking at him suspiciously.

Okita sighed. 'Don't worry. I'm not the one who put those on you. We had a doctor tend to your wounds.'

Akane slowly raised her sleeve and looked at the floor.

'How are you feeling? Does it still hurt?' she looked up at the concern in his voice. She just noticed that there were bags under his eyes and he looked tired. Did he watch over her the whole night?

Okita seemed to have read her thoughts and pointed a finger at her accusingly. 'Yes, I watched over you the whole night. Did you expect me to sleep and rest knowing that you're like this because you stupidly pulled off that stunt? If you just didn't look so bad I'd have definitely killed you off in your sleep last night.'

Akane scowled at him.

'So are you feeling alright or not? I don't have all the time in the world to play nurse to you,' he said impatiently.

She nodded.

'Good. Now come here.'

Akane looked at him suspiciously and shook her head.

'You really want me to go get you?' he growled. She flinched at the sound of his voice and reluctantly approached him. He handed her a piece of paper and a glass of water.

'Drink that medicine. It'll make you feel better.'

Seeing how ruffled and tired he is in close view, she just decided to follow his order and drank the powdered medicine at one go. She finished the whole cup of water and winced at its bitterness. Akane felt his eyes on her and she tried peeking at him cautiously just in time for him to hit the top of her head a little hard with the empty sheath of his sword. She soundlessly started with the pain and bit her lip as she massaged her head. She looked at him with the best withering stare she can afford.

'Don't you look at me like that. That's for what you did last night. I don't remember asking you to do anything for me so don't pull something like that again. I had to look after you and it's very troubling and annoying. I don't need your help,' he said to her a little angrily. Not having any facilities to retaliate, she just stuck her tongue at him.

He did not look impressed at her childishness.

'The only good thing that came out of your recklessness is that you've lost your capacity to talk. You're much likable that way,' he said, his usual grin finally creeping on his lips again. Akane whacked her hand at him which he, of course, easily blocked. He started laughing.

Despite her mild irritation, she realized she felt relieved seeing him like that again.

'Since it seems like you're feeling better now, why don't I lead you to your torture?'

She looked at him, totally terrified. Will they kill her now?

He just smirked at her.

'Oh, you think you'll get away with this easily? I doubt you'll have a shred of your soul left after the demon commander is through with you. And I must say, he was really angry when I told him how you blatantly disobeyed his and your captain's orders,' he drawled, looking utterly satisfied with himself.

She gulped and wished she was just unconscious again.

\* \* \*

><p>'What were you thinking!'<p>

She jumped a little and winced at Hijikata's voice. Okita, being the sadist he is, did not show her any compassion and brought her to the usual meeting room. The others looked utterly pleased when they saw her but she nearly shriveled in fear when she saw a very angry Hijikata glaring at her.

'You disobeyed orders on your first mission. That is not something we tolerate here!'

She stared at the ground and only tried peeking a little at Saitou who was sitting against the wall. She snapped back her gaze at the floor though when she saw his withering look.

'We cannot have someone in the group with an attitude like this. You were the watcher. You cannot leave your post no matter what happens. If you don't know how to follow plans, then you can leave now.'

Akane's head shot up and she looked at Hijikata pleadingly. She shook her head and placed her hand on her chest.

They'll kill me. They'll kill me for sure. I know too much. I can't die yet. I have to find my friends.

'Hey Hijikata, cut the girl some slack will you? She's still injured. She can't even talk yet,' Shinpachi hesitantly said.

'Yeah. She helped us a lot. Come on, Hijikata-san. Scolding a girl doesn't seem to feel right,' Heisuke added a little uncomfortably.

'The fact that she is a girl is the point here. She wasn't supposed to be doing that in the first place!'

Akane looked at him helplessly then bowed her head, hiding her face in her long hair to cover the tears that were in danger of spilling from her eyes. She felt utterly hopeless. After a moment of silence, she finally heard a sigh.

'On the other hand, I want to thank you. What you did was thoughtless

but you saved one of our own after all.'

Her head shot up and she stared at Hijikata. He seemed to be just struggling to keep his stern face on. She beamed at him.

'But. I don't want you doing that again. The men here are perfectly capable of protecting themselves. Putting your life in danger to save them means you're looking down on them. Understood?'

She bowed in apology.

'And please. Next time, don't be in a rush to die, will you?' She can almost swear that there was a ghost of a smile on the vice-captain's face. Akane nodded and smiled.

'I'll have to punish you though.'

She nodded again, ready to take on anything that he'll give her just to show him how dedicated she is.

'Escort those men tonight. Make sure they don't get in a fight and bring them home here before midnight,' he said, nodding towards the other captains in the room.

Akane blinked a couple of times in confusion.

\* \* \*

><p>'Drinkiiiiing! We're going out drinking! We'll drink ourselves siiiiilly!'<p>

Akane watched Heisuke and Shinpachi lead the way through the narrow streets, singing the little song they've composed loudly. They were headed to a restaurant to celebrate the success of their mission.

'Don't take what Hijikata-san said seriously, Akane-chan. Just enjoy tonight,' she looked at Harada who seemed to have noticed her watching the two captains. She guessed she still looked clueless because he chuckled and stared at the two ahead.

'This is him trying to reward you, you know,' he said. 'Hijikata is not that good with kind words but he has his own way of showing his gratefulness. He was really concerned last night. We all were.'

Her face softened and she bowed her head a little to him. She just felt guilty now of making them worry about her.

'It's okay,' he said. 'I guess you have to make it up to Souji though. He didn't really seem like himself last night. The guy must have felt guilty since you saved him after all.'

Akane looked behind her at where Okita and Saitou are. They were busy talking. He still looked a little tired but some color had returned to his face already. She tore her gaze away from him when she noticed her heartbeat turning a little erratic.

'What happened to your neck, anyway? Is it still too painful to talk?' Harada asked, staring at the bandages she had wrapped around her throat to hide the red, angry welts. She touched it and shook her

head at him as she remembered something. The man on the tree. She made a mental note to tell them what happened once her voice comes back.

'Oh, here we are! I'll have a table reserved for us!' Shinpachi declared, stopping in front of a small restaurant. He waved at them to hurry then went on ahead.

'Hey! Shinpatsu! Don't forget to order more pork!' Heisuke called after him. 'Akane-chan, let's go! You're really the star of this party! Don't hold back okay?' he called to her before charging the place after his friend.

She smiled meekly.

'Well, let's go then. Those two get cranky when you make the alcohol wait.'

She started a little as she felt Harada close his big hand around her own. She barely had time to register the warmth of it when she felt herself being towed into the restaurant.

\* \* \*

><p>'And then, he chased after her and did not stop until the geiko finally got scared and threw her sandal on his face!'<p>

The captains burst out laughing while Shinpachi blushed furiously. He downed another cup of sake as Heisuke continued his story.

'Then there was also this one time when he was so drunk and grabbed someone from behind. He was scared out of his wits when the person looked around and he saw that it was a man! He was even more muscular than him!' Heisuke collapsed into a fit of laughter, his face tinged with red from the alcohol. Akane chuckled silently, and looked at Shinpachi who was pouting already.

'Well, his hair looked really nice and soft from behind,' he mumbled.

That sent off another racket of laughter.

'Akane, are you sure you're eating enough? You don't have to drink if you don't want to but eat something,' Harada whispered in her ear. He was sitting beside her and was looking at her with a slightly concerned look on his face. She instantly blushed when she looked back at him and noticed how close he is. She just shook her head and smiled at him. She even took a piece of pork and put it in her mouth to humor him. He grinned at her and she blushed even more.

\_Really? What's wrong with her right now? Was it the alcohol?\_

She was just about to reach for a new piece of pork with her chopsticks when another pair blocked hers on the plate. She looked up and saw Souji looking at her, a mocking, slightly irritated expression on his face. She bristled at the challenge on his expression and tried to pick the pork again which he easily swiped to the other side with his chopsticks. She glared at him. He glared back.

'Ehâ€|why is a girl sitting with the police force?'

She was forced to rip her eyes off from the staring competition to look at the server who've approached their table with a jug of tea. She has long, dark brown hair and her hazel eyes were staring at her curiously. The captains stared at her in shock.

'Ahâ€|ehâ€|he's not a girl! What made you think that? And we're not the police,' Shinpachi said, laughing a little nervously.

The girl looked at him oddly then stared back at her.

'She's definitely a girl,' she said. 'Are you a geiko? You're not dressed like one.'

Akane shook her head vigorously and waved her arms in denial in front of her. She looked at the boys around her for help.

'You see, he's really not a girl. Why would we bring a girl to this kind of place? Right?' Harada said a little awkwardly, smiling at the server in front of them. She looked just the same age as Akane and Heisuke. Her eyes traveled over Akane's face and widened when they saw the bandages on her neck.

'Oh! What happened to you?!" she gave the bottle she was holding to Heisuke without even looking at him and rushed to her. Akane did not even have the chance to evade her hands which cautiously touched the bandages on her neck. She looked genuinely worried. Then her eyes turned hard and she turned her head sharply at the boys with her.

'All of you!'

The captains visibly jumped from their seats a little in unison.

'How can you let a girl have this kind of wound?! Don't you know that our skin should be kept sacred and pure?! Why let something as beautiful as this get tainted even by the slightest scratch?!" Akane stared ahead as she felt her head pulled into the girl's chest. She doesn't have any inkling of idea on what's happening.

'Ummâ€|'

'Answer me!'

The boys all flinched on their seats again.

'You seeâ€|he's really not a boyâ€|' Shinpachi tried again. His voice died, however, when the girl directed a deadly glare at him.

'Why are you saying that?! Don't you know that's insulting! Look at her! She's definitely a girl!' Akane then felt the flaps of her kimono being opened, showing the top part of her breasts covered only by a thin layer of bandages.

She would have damaged her throat from screaming if only she had the voice to do it.

In less than a second, almost all of the captains were upon her. Heisuke jumped from his seat, dropped the jar he was holding, and was about to lunge at her while Shinpachi who was sitting beside her threw the pork bits out of the large plate to try to use it to cover her. Saitou dropped his chopsticks straight into the floor and Okita had his hand on the hilt of his sword, ready to pull his weapon. Only Harada was able to rip the girl's hand away from her kimono which Akane immediately closed.

'Wowâ€|Holy Golden Buddha help me,' Shinpachi muttered, his eyes closed.

'Miss, I'm sorry, but what were you trying to do?' Harada asked, heaving heavy breaths.

'I'm just showing you that she's a girl!' the girl stubbornly said. She looked at Akane who shrunk a little on her seat in fear. 'Sorry bout that, but I won't let anyone treat a beautiful maiden like this.' She nodded vigorously, her eyes wide.

'You didn't have to do that,' Heisuke mumbled from his seat. The server was about to snap back a reply to him when her mouth suddenly went a little slack and she stared at him glassy eyed for a couple of seconds.

'What's happening now?' Shinpachi whispered, afraid to break the silence and get the wrath of the waitress.

Heisuke seemed to have just noticed her staring at him and nearly fell off his seat.

'W-what?' he stuttered.

'I like you!' the girl suddenly screeched, gaining a few stares from the other people in the room.

'WHAT? !'

He nearly ran out of the restaurant as she went towards him and grabbed his hands.

'What's your name? It's the first time I've seen you here!' she looked at the spilled tea on the floor. 'Do you want more tea?' she asked, her eyes shining.

'Stupid, Shinpachi. Of all the restaurants you can choose from, you got one with a crazy server,' Souji mumbled from his seat. Beside him, Saitou was still looking ahead blankly in shock. He didn't seem to have moved a muscle ever since Akane's unwilling showing of flesh.

They watched hopelessly as the girl harassed Heisuke who looked ready to commit seppuku right then and there using the wooden chopsticks he was holding. He looked back at Shinpachi and Harada helplessly but the two just shook their heads fervently, unwilling to take her on. The girl saw him staring and looked back at the group. Her eyes settled on Akane again.

'Oh, we have to be friends!' she said as she charged towards the almost shaking girl. 'I'm Sakura by the way. And you are?'

'Heisuke, why don't you take this lovely girl for a walk and explain to her everything? We don't want Akira being mistaken as a girl, right?' Okita suggested, looking pointedly at the younger captain.

'What?! NO!'

'Come on, I'm sure you want to get to know each other, ne?'

The girl named Sakura clapped her hands and turned to Heisuke again, beaming. 'That would be lovely! My mother can take over my tables right now! Let's go!' she grabbed the boy by the arm and towed him outside.

And Heisuke Todo, the legendary eighth captain of the Shinsengumi, could do nothing more than mouth 'Help me' to his friends who simply shot him apologetic looks.

\* \* \*

><p>Akane took in the cold air outside, finally relieved to get out of the restaurant. The captains were still finishing the food so she decided to go out first to get a breath of fresh air. Heisuke still hasn't arrived yet. She silently prayed for his soul.<p>

She suddenly looked down when she felt someone tugging softly at her hakama. She saw a young girl, probably not more than four looking up at her with her big innocent eyes.

'Missâ€¢!' the little girl tugged at her again. She got on her knees and smiled at her.

'The man there told me to give this to you,' the child said, pointing at a dark alleyway. She was holding a thin piece of paper. Akane stared at the alley in confusion but did not see anyone there. She finally took the paper. Who would give her a letter? She doesn't know anyone from here except the members of the Shinsegumi. Without a voice, she can't really ask the child to describe the man so she just patted her head. The girl smiled at her and ran away. With a frown, Akane opened the piece of paper.

And felt her blood freeze at the words written there.

'I'm coming for you.'

## 9. Chapter 9: The Demon Unmasked

A/N: probably my last update in a while. had a few chapters lined up but won't post them here as fast. I'm still not sure about the plot twist I created so will think about it for a couple of days, or weeks. I really don't know.

\* \* \*

><p>'Watch your steps. Slide your foot when you attack. Make your arm movements more fluid! '<p>

Akane blinked at the sting of the sweat that trickled to her eyes but

did not dare wipe it off. She kept her gaze at her captain who she was currently training with. He looked composed and calm as always. She on the other hand, looked dead tired and was panting as if she ran a couple of miles. She poised the wooden sword she was holding and readied herself to attack again.

Slide your foot. Make your arm movements more fluid.\_

She chanted his words in her mind as she charged again. Saitou stepped back and blocked her as gracefully as always. This time though, she was sure she saw him place more effort on his movements.

'That was better.'

She wiped the sweat off her forehead using the sleeve of her kimono.  
'Thank you, captain.'

'You still have a long way to go though. We'll continue tomorrow.'

'Hai.'

'We'll leave for patrol in 30 minutes. Wear the proper uniform,' he turned around to leave the room.

'Yes!' Akane called to him and returned her training sword into its shelf. It has been almost a week and a half ever since her first mission and she has recovered sufficiently enough to finally start training with Saitou. She had relayed the information about the mysterious man that she encountered to him, Hijikata, Sannan, and Kondou the moment she was capable enough to utter some words and they were all convinced that he was the one behind the creation of the new batch of rasetsus. She kept the letter she received a secret though. Somehow, she felt as if she had to tackle that on her own.

Akane peeked around at the communal bathroom to see if there was anyone there. She wanted to freshen up first before finally leaving for her first patrol. She felt excited and anxious at the same time because today will be her first chance to actually try looking for her friends. She wanted more than anything to look for them the day after she got the letter but she was forbidden by Kondou to go out in order to fully recover. She prayed every night that her friends were still alive.

After walking around the vast bathing area and making sure that there was no soul in sight, she started to strip and hung her kimono and hakama on the shoji screen on the side of the pool. The place was styled in the sento public bath layout and she tried to avoid the pool as much as possible since using it will easily expose her to anyone who will enter the room. She walked towards the area behind the screen, flexing the stiff muscles on her shoulder, and untied her hair. She picked the dipper on the pail, poured, and sighed as she felt the soothing coolness of the water on her body. She was just about to pour again when she heard the sound of the door opening.

Someone sighed causing her to freeze in fear, the dipper she was holding still in mid-air.

Akane felt her heartbeat drum faster against her chest as she heard the rustle of clothes falling to the floor. She was wet and utterly naked with the thin, paper shoji screen as the only thing separating her from the newcomer. She hurriedly but silently reached for the clothes she hanged earlier. Her hand was shaking so much, however, causing her hakama to fall to the other side of the screen, leaving her with only her white kimono. The man was now whistling at the other side. Then he suddenly stopped and gave a sound of mild irritation. Akane heard retreating footsteps and the door opening again.

She nearly collapsed in relief. She put on her kimono which was long enough to reach the middle of her thighs and wrapped the sash around her waist. She did not even bother to dry herself as she rushed to the other side to pick her pants from the floor. She was just in the middle of straightening up when she heard the door open again. She turned around in panic and screamed when she felt herself crash against a body. The force caused the man to fall back with a startled shout and her landing on top of him.

Akane swore her eyes nearly popped out of their sockets when she saw a very surprised and naked Okita Souji below her.

\* \* \*

><p>'AHHHHHHHHHmfffff!'</p>

Akane flailed as she felt his hand shot out from underneath her to cover her mouth, muffling the sounds of her screams.

'Stop it! Stop screaming unless you want a dozen men to rush here!', he hissed at her, his green eyes fleeting towards the door.

That immediately silenced her. She continued looking at him with wide eyes.

'Do you promise you won't scream?'

She nodded her head and he lowered his hand slowly just in case he needed to shut her up again. Akane saw his eyes widen a little as they grazed over her form.

\_Her form which is still indecently and improperly straddling his own half-naked body.\_

She immediately crossed her arms around her and jumped from her position. Okita sat up and massaged the back of his head. He was only wearing his pants, showing off his ridiculously toned torso. His hair was out of its usual ponytail and he looked a little boyish with some stray strands falling over his eyes which were currently semi-glaring at her in shock, anger, and an emotion she couldn't quite place.

'What were you trying to do?' he growled.

'I was taking a bath.'

'I can see that,' he said, looking at her pointedly. That immediately made her remember that she was only wearing her kimono which is currently in danger of showing everything if not for her hands

grasping its front. She became suddenly aware of the sting of air on her exposed legs.

'You do realize this is a communal bathroom and that anyone can walk in on you, right? Why didn't you take a bath in the morning?'

'I already did, okay? I was trying to freshen up because I trained with Saitou-san. No one usually uses the bath during this time anyway' she shot back, also a little irritated herself.

Okita sighed and stood up. Akane swore she almost swallowed her tongue as his taut stomach almost became level with her eyes when he straightened up. She watched in a stupor as his muscles flexed when he picked up the towels he brought which were now scattered on the floor. It was the first time she saw someone so beautiful like him. Yes, there were times when she saw the boys in her class without their tops on during physical education classes but they weren't so sculpted like him. They were boys. He was a man.

'Enjoying the view?'

She nearly jumped and looked at him, scandalized. He was staring at her with his eyebrow raised and he seemed to be fighting the urge to smirk. She blushed maddeningly and looked pointedly at the floor in front of her.

'Put some clothes on,' she tried to sound angry.

He chuckled. 'I can say the same to you.'

She was just about to retaliate when her vision was blurred by a towel thrown over her head.

'Here. Use that to go out. You can't use your hakama,' he inclined his head towards the pool where she saw her black pants floating. 'You must have thrown it when you collided with me earlier.'

Akane struggled standing up without further exposing anything. She saw him offer his hand and shyly took it. Her face was still burning and she bowed her head as he pulled her up to hide it. She wrapped the towel around the lower part of her body.

'You probably won't meet anyone outside if you run fast enough to your room,' he said. They were standing so close now and her eyes were just level to his chest. She swallowed again.

'Y-yes. Thank you. I need to get going now,' With that, she half-run, half-stumbled towards the door, her face bright red.

Souji stared after her for a few more seconds before sighing.

'And now, for that cold bath I need,' he mumbled and headed towards the pool.

\* \* \*

><p>Akane adjusted the sword on her waist and let her gaze roam the surroundings. Around her, people were going about their usual businesses. Some were rushing to go home while shops here and there were starting to pack up their merchandises and were closing for the

day. Beyond her, the bars and the okiyas were starting to come alive, their lights lively and enticing in the fast falling darkness of the night.<p>

'Akira-san, take the left route with them. We'll meet at this same spot after an hour,' Saitou said, nodding towards three other men. 'All of you, please guide him. This is his first patrol,' he said to the others.

She has just turned and started following the other members of the patrol team when she heard him call her again.

'Akira-san.'

'Hai?' she turned around and looked at him.

'Come back without any kind of bruises, okay?'

She smiled at the way he put it.

'Yes captain. Please take care too,' she bowed to him.

Saitou nodded and walked towards the other direction.

They have been walking around for a little over thirty minutes already and Akane has managed to ask a total of 7 people about her friends. It was really hard for her to ask around without looking suspicious to his companions. Still, she found ways to 'innocently' stray a little to do her secret investigation. So far, no one in the people she inquired saw her friends.

She sighed when a ball bounced across from her and went straight into the dark narrow street on her left. She watched it disappear into the shadows but looked back when two children, one boy and a girl, came rushing from the right.

'See, Sumiko. That's why I told you not to throw it too hard. Where is it now?' a boy of around seven said as he moved his head left and right, squinting in the darkness. The girl beside him who looked a couple of years younger sobbed and tugged at his kimono.

'Oniichan, my ball. It's goneâ€!' she said, rubbing the tears from her eyes.

'No, no. We'll find it,' the boy patted his little sister's head affectionately. His eyes found her standing in the middle of the street and he rushed to her, tagging his sister behind him.

'Ah, Oniichan, have you seen a ball? It was my sister's. It was red and about this big,' he made a circular motion with his hands.

Akane smiled at him. 'Yes, I saw it. It went right there,' she pointed towards the direction of the dark alley. A smile flashed on both children's faces but it was immediately swallowed by matching fearful expressions.

'It's dark oniichan, I don't want to go there,' the little girl whimpered.

'It's okay, I'll just go. You wait here,' the boy said, trying his

best to look courageous for his sister despite of the fear on his own face. He was about to walk towards the dark street when the girl grasped at his kimono again.

'Don't leave me here, oniichan! Mama said there are monsters here when it turns dark!' the girl nearly wailed.

'Hey, it's okay. If you want, I can get it for you. Just wait here, both of you,' Akane said, not wanting to see the girl cry. Both children looked up at her in relief. She smiled at them and walked towards the dark alley.

She found the ball behind a big barrel. She walked backed to the children who moved to the fringes of the alley to wait for her.

'Here,' she offered the ball to the girl who beamed.

'Arigatou!'

The boy also smiled at her. 'Arigatou, Oniichan.'

'It's nothing. Go home now, okay? It's dark already.'

The two nodded, bowed a little to her, and ran towards the direction where they came from. Akane watched them with a fond smile on her face as she remembered her big brother. It has been a while since she last saw him after he entered the university.

'You seem to have a soft spot for children,' a voice behind her suddenly said. She felt chills creep from her spine to her neck as she recognized the low, menacing timbre.

Akane whipped around, her hand on the hilt of her sword. From beyond the shadows, a man emerged and started walking languidly towards her. Every step he made seemed to add a slice of terror in her chest. He was wearing a luxurious looking black kimono with silver markings. She can only see his lips which were quirked in a sly smile, the upper part of his face hidden by the wide brimmed hat he was wearing.

'You're the man on the tree.'

He simply chuckled. He was a mere five feet away from her now and she found herself stumbling a little backwards. She was still hidden in the alley though and silently wished for her comrades to have the sense to look a little harder in the shadows.

'I see you've received my letter,' he said, his smile widening.

She pulled her sword in a flash. He did not flinch and just cocked his head curiously at her.

'What do you want from me?' she hissed.

'Are you sure you still don't know yet?'

'Answer the question!'

He almost laughed. Slowly, he removed his hat. He had raven black hair that fell silkily to his forehead and gracefully curled a little at the back of his neck. He was extremely handsome with aristocratic features made even more prominent by the smirk on his lips. What caught Akane's eyes and made her nearly gasp, however, were his blood red eyes.

'I need you to help me, oni,' he said, his eyes boring down on her brown ones. She took a step back again at the name he used to call her.

'I'm not an oni.'

He took a step towards her to close the distance she added between them. 'Not a full one, yes. But you have the blood of a demon flowing in your veins,' he turned his head to the side 'I can smell it on you,' he added after a moment.

'I don't know what you're talking about,' Akane tried to keep her voice from wavering but failed. All the signals in her body and brain told her to run. To hide. Still, she remained rooted on the spot like a moth that can't stray away from the dangerous flame.

'You can't fool me, girl. I saw what you did to my rasetsu,' he nodded at her as shock crossed her expression. 'Yesâ€œ|the one that attacked you that night? Your friends thought they killed it,' he took a step closer again. He just needed to reach out to touch her now. 'But you know what? The monster is better than ever. All because of you,' he leaned towards her, leveling his lips to her ear. 'All because of your blood,' he whispered.

Akane felt her heart stop. What is he talking about? It can't be true. Her eyes stared unbelievably at the darkness beyond, her body too afraid to move. Everything about the man screamed dangerous but still she felt like a useless puppet who can't pull back without the order of her puppet master. She can't even move her sword.

'That's why I need your help, you see. And you'll help me. Whether you want toâ€œ|or not,' she shivered as she felt his lips faintly brush the shell of her ear before he pulled back.

'Don't worry. You can still play with your fake soldiers for now. I'll get you when I think it's time,' he casually said, looking at her again with his troubling red eyes. Then he started walking again as if to leave her. Just when he was about to pass her, he murmured something that made ice seep into her marrow.

'When that time comes, I suggest you don't try to struggle. Unless you want people to die.'

\* \* \*

><p>He walked towards the darkness again, a satisfied smile plastered on his lips. He wasn't really planning on talking to her tonight but she looked so helpless earlier that he wasn't able to stop himself. He could almost taste her fear heavily in his tongue as he talked to her. If only the time wasn't so immature, he would have taken her with him now.<p>

He heard a soft rustling behind him and looked back calmly. Someone

was moving towards him in a slow gait. His eyes squinted a little as he recognized the brown haori and white kimono but he tried hiding his distress by smirking at the person.

'Following me tonight?'

The person stopped in front of him and studied him with his piercing eyes.

'What are you planning to do, Ayato?'

He barked a short laugh. 'It's been a while since we last talked and that is what you ask me first?'

'I saw you threaten a girl, that is against the rules of theâ€''

'Oni, yes. I know. But you see, she's not really human so it does not really apply to her,' he leaned on the wall and looked at the person in front of him with challenge in his eyes. 'I need her. And I'll have her,' he said with a little more menace in his voice.

'Are you still going around with your nonsense aim?' the man asked, his brows knitted together.

'Yes. And you are not going to stop me, Kazama,' he said in a low voice. Red eyes met red. There was deadly defiance in one, threat in the other pair.

'You will leave me with no choice if you do that,' the person called Kazama said after a while. Ayato pushed back from the wall with a chuckle, turned his back on him, and started walking away.

'If you say so. But I believe you still won't hurt me,' he looked back at him and his smirk widened. 'Big brother.'

## 10. Chapter 10: The Start of the Storm

A/N: okay so I know I said I won't be posting in a while. I LIED. haha. Just kidding. I was just thinking I already had this chapter ready and it's sort of not really connected to the plot twists I was having so much difficulty figuring out so I'll just post it anyway. I had this very random instinct to just throw Souji and Akane in one room and have them create beautiful babies and live happily ever after so I came up with a chapter that will practically be about nothing but the two of them. Needed to feel that they are making progress, right? Anyway, I hope you can let me know about how I'm doing. I know I have a silent pool of readers from the story stats page and I'm more than happy about all of you. Drop me a review if you have some time, okay? okay.

P.S. I've recently fallen in love with Saitou and Chikage because of all cute pictures I see of them in Tumblr. Who has a tumblr account here? tell me your username and I'll follow you!

\* \* \*

><p>'Come on, open your mouth.'<p>

'No.'

'The food will get cold, kitten. Come on. Be a good girl.'

'Stop it!'

Akane slapped away the hand hovering in front of her face impatiently. Across from her, Heisuke, Harada, and Shinpachi snickered on their seats. She threw a death glare at Okita who merely smirked and winked at her. She almost cursed herself when she felt heat travel from her neck to her cheeks. She looked away and inconspicuously edged towards Hijikata who was sitting beside her. Who would be crazy enough to entertain the idea of inching closer to the vice-captain who looked so serious and stern so early in the morning? Turns out to be her. All because of a stupid man with stupid green eyes.

With her real identity still being kept a secret to the rest of the Shinsengumi, Akane was asked to mingle as little as possible with the other members of the group. She rarely goes out of her room except when she had to train with her squad, have private lessons with Saitou, and go on patrol. The only times she went out was to help Heisuke with shopping and to prepare breakfast with Harada who is now assigned to be her partner in the kitchen. That was also the reason why every day, in her three weeks in the headquarters, she ate all her meals together with the captains.

It was weird for her at first. Thankfully, Heisuke, Harada, and Shinpachi seemed to have made it their mission to make her as comfortable as possible. They included her in their jokes to make sure she didn't feel left out and they even sometimes told her old stories to make sure she's not missing out on something. It helped her a lot especially with the stress of still not finding her friends and the chilling night where she met the man that scared the soul out of her. For men who haven't exactly lived with a girl, they were doing great as friends.

Every meal had been peaceful and fun. Until today.

Akane opened the door to the room where they eat their breakfast.

'Good morning,' she bowed respectfully before entering and occupied her seat beside Hijikata.

'Good morning,' Hijikata answered before taking another sip of tea from his cup. She scanned the room and saw that almost everyone was already there. She smiled as she looked at Heisuke, Shinpachi, and Harada who were still looking bleary-eyed and spaced out in front of her. Must have spent last night drinking out late again, she thought. Saitou and Sannan were already picking out at their bowls of food serenely.

Her eyes fell on the empty seat beside her. Ever since their embarrassing encounter in the bathroom, Akane has never crossed paths with Okita again. She heard from Heisuke that he was sent to go to Osaka to look for possible recruits and will not be back in a week or two. Needless to say, her life has been peaceful since then. Suddenly, an image of him lying below her in the bathroom flashed in her mind. She flushed and shook her head a little. That was the last

thing she wants to remember right now. She picked up her chopsticks to finally start eating.

'How rude, you've all started without me,' a voice from the door playfully said and she froze. The others looked up from their own businesses.

'Ah, Souji! Welcome baaaa-aaawwwwn,' Heisuke yawned, then shrugged, not even bothering to finish his sentence.

Beside her, Hijikita put down his cup and looked at the newcomer.

'Welcome back. How was it?'

Okita slumped on his seat. 'Fine. Was able to look for a couple of new ones. I doubt they will do well though. They all looked so frail to me.'

'Good work. Let's have a meeting after this to talk to the recruits.'

'Haaaaaiii,' he said, rolling the word in his tongue in his typical teasing way. Then his eyes fell on the girl sitting beside him. His lips quirked into a grin.

Akane stiffened on her seat as she felt his gaze on her. Not today. Not today. Please spare me today. She chanted in her mind as she tried to take hold of a piece of fish with her chopsticks.

'O-ha-you, kitten.'

She inwardly groaned.

'Ohayou, Okita-san,' she politely but indifferently said and continued to eat. Of course, her subtle act of brushing him off didn't affect him one bit. She even saw him lean more towards her in her peripheral vision.

'You didn't miss me?' She felt her ears slowly starting to burn at his teasing tone. Still, she steeled herself from retaliating. The man seemed to enjoy it more when he sees her out of sorts and she won't give him the satisfaction.

'I believe I don't have a reason to miss you, Okita-san,' she answered coolly and took a bite from her food.

'Eh? But you seemed to be so interested in me while we were in the bathroom last week.'

She choked.

The boys around her looked up in interest. Shinpachi's groggy look was gone in an instant as he asked, 'Bathroomâ€œlast week?'

'Ah yes. I was about to take a late afternoon freshening up when I saw her there. I wasn't even able to close the door properly because she was suddenly on top of m-' he wasn't able to finish what he was saying as Akane suddenly stuffed his mouth with the food from her

chopsticks. Expect him to make an accident seem like the lewdest of moments! Her face was hot and she can feel the gazes of the men in the room trained at the two of them. The man beside her, however, looked as unfazed as always and only widened his grin. He started chewing on the food she forced on him to shut him up, his green eyes glinting with mischievousness.

Akane was just about to tell the others what really happened when Okita leaned a little backwards on his seat, putting his weight on his hands. His eyes never left hers. The movement caused his kimono to open in the front and showed more of his chest than usual. She gaped at the sight, utterly speechless. The images of him in the bathroom popped in her mind again like bubbles and she blushed brighter than usual. She's probably as red as Harada's hair by now.

She was shook from her reverie as she saw the chest she was avidly gawking at move in silent laughter. Akane tore his eyes away from the sight and glared at him. He seemed to be putting all of his energy not to burst into laughter in front of her. Her eyes widened before turning into slits.

\_ He intentionally did that! He knew it. He knew his effect on her!\_

'Please cover yourself. I feel scared for your health with you being exposed like that,' she almost growled at him.

'Will you take care of me in case I get sick?'

She ignored him, picked up her chopsticks, and turned to her food again.

'Hey, kitten.'

Silence.

'Kittennnn.'

\_Ignore him. Ignore. Him. \_

'Psst!'

'What?' she asked, her teeth gritted. The other captains continued watching them in interest, clearly entertained at their little show. Even Hijikata stopped in the middle of drinking his tea and was studying them earnestly.

'Look at me.'

'I refuse.'

'Please? Just one second? I have something to show you.'

'No.'

She felt him shift in his position. The next thing she knew, she was leaning so close to her, his breath fanning the few stray strands of hair that had fallen on her face.

'Fine. Then I guess I'll just go to your room to show it then,' he whispered in her ear.

The sudden warm breath on her cheek and his words caused her to look at him in shock.

That was a bad decision.

He was leaning so close to her that she can almost see inside his kimono. Of course, her eyes' instinct was to immediately fly to his torso. To add insult to injury, she lost her grasp on her chopsticks as she stared and she heard them clatter to the floor in an almost painful, mocking way.

Okita's grin turned into a full blown smirk and he pulled away looking satisfied with himself.

'Having trouble eating now? I can help you with that,' he reached out for the chopsticks, lazily wiped it off with the napkin on her tray and snatched the bowl from her.

'Souji, it's too early to harass someone,' Hijikata sighed and continued with his breakfast.

The boy beside her just smiled widely at her.

'It's never too early to play, right kitten?'

And that is the reason why Akane decided that she will always choose to snuggle up with the demon vice-captain beside her anytime than to sit so close to Okita Souji.

\* \* \*

><p>Akane tightened the rope around her hair and looked outside her window. Darkness was quickly enveloping the surroundings and the headquarters looked calm and serene under the light of the soft moon. She reached out for her sword and fastened it securely on her waist. With one final look at her mirror, she slipped on her sandals and readied to go out for yet another patrol tonight.<p>

She was just about to head towards the gates when she saw Saitou turn around the corner.

'Good evening, captain,' Akane bowed to him respectfully. He nodded to her.

'I was just about to call for you. Our patrol is cancelled.'

'Ah? Why?' she asked, disappointment clearly evident in her voice. She had been quite expectant to go out and continue her search for her friends tonight. Her lack of leads about their whereabouts and condition was clearly taking a toll on her lately and she is turning more and more desperate with each passing day. The thrice weekly patrolling of their division was definitely not enough for her but it was the only time she can actually use to go around and search in her own way. She knew that she had earned most of the trust of the captains by now after her stint in their first mission but she can still feel some of them being wary of her sometimes. Not that she can blame them. It's not like she's exactly being honest with them.

'I was asked to go to Shimabara tonight by Hijikata-san.'

Her face fell. Saitou noticed it and looked at her closely.

'You always seem so eager to go out.'

Akane looked up and tried to erase the disappointment on her face. She can't let him doubt her.

'No. It's just that I've always been cooped up inside so I'm always looking forward to go around freely.'

Saitou stared at her as if calculating his words.

'You can't really blame the commanders. After all you're stillâ€¦' he trailed off.

\_Your hostage. In a way. Yes, I know. \_She stared at the floor.

'If you want you can go with the division taking over our patrol tonight.'

She peeked at him, trying to gauge his expression if he's just testing her or not. He looked serious and sincere though.

'Will that be okay?'

'You're already prepared anyway.'

'Thank you, Saitou-san.'

He did not immediately answer.

'I trust you.'

She felt a pang of shock in her chest at those three words. The shock turned into warmth and she smiled at him gratefully.

Her captain suddenly looked up and stared behind her as she heard footfalls on the hallway.

'Souji. Akira will be accompanying you tonight.'

She turned around in shock and saw Okita walking towards them wearing his usual blue haori. He seemed to have noticed her 'you've-got-to-be-kidding-me' expression on her face as he gave her a feline smile.

'That would be great,' he said to Saitou though his eyes were still trained on her. She looked away and openly stared at the yard ahead.

'Going to Shimabara?' she heard him ask. Saitou hummed a yes.

'Take care.'

'Yes. Akira, follow his orders. Consider him your captain tonight. I'll be going now,' she felt her mouth fall open but wasn't able to say anything more as Saitou turned his back on them and left. Beside

her, she could almost swear she felt Okita internally cartwheeling with joy at the words 'follow', 'orders', and 'captain.' She sighed

'So, you and me tonight, huh?'

She only answered with a glare. He just smiled and started walking ahead.

'Well, let's get going kitten. You wouldn't want to make your captain wait, would you? I can be very creative when it comes to punishing my subordinates.'

She stomped a little after him, throwing dagger stares at his back.

\* \* \*

><p>Akane looked around every street they passed by, trying her best to inconspicuously ask around whenever Okita had his back on her. Strangely, she felt him watching her every move tonight. Despite of her eagerness to pick up information, however, she made it a point to steer clear of dark alleys. Every time she looked at the shadows, she can hear the voice of the man inside her head. His words held the confidence that says he can have whatever he wants, whenever he wants. She had never felt so scared in her life.</p>

She internally shook herself and walked a little ways from her group who seemed busy checking out swords displayed in a newly opened shop. She approached a stall selling traditional fans and touched a white one with rose petals designed across its surface. It was beautiful.

'That would be the perfect gift for your lover, young man,' the kind-faced vendor behind the stall smiled at her. She smiled at his words.

'It's lovely. But I don't have anyone to give it to yet.'

He chuckled, nodded, and shuffled some of the fans displayed on his wooden table.

'Feel free to look then,' he motioned towards his merchandise and continued arranging. She stepped a little closer to his stall and leaned towards the displays as if to study the fans more closely.

'Um, Mister?'

He looked up at her.

'Is it okay if I ask you something? You see, I'm looking for my friends,' she dropped her voice as she lifted up the white fan in front of her as if to look at it closely.

'Oh. I see. Can you tell me how they look like?' the man kindly answered. She gave out Rika and Suzume's description. She was sure he wouldn't miss them if ever he saw them. They were too beautiful to go unnoticed. Unfortunately, he shook his head.

'I'm sorry but I don't think I've seen one of them. I'm here every day so that means they haven't gone this way yet.'

Her face fell and she bowed her thank you to him. She had just returned the fan on the table when she felt a hand on her shoulder.

'Finished window shopping, Akira?' she felt cold wash through her as she looked around to see Okita. His words were innocent but the look in his eyes clearly told her he knew she was up to something.

'Ah, yes,' she gave one last smile to the vendor and turned back towards her group with him following closely behind.

'Captain, is it okay if we head out for a drink? We're finished for the day, right?' one of the members of the patrol asked the moment they were within hearing shot.

'Sure. Just don't go past the curfew.'

'Would you like to come with us?'

Okita laughed. 'No, I don't feel like drinking tonight. I have enough scheduled drinking sessions in my plate with Shinpachi and Harada anyway,' he made a good-natured shooing motion with his hand. The men chuckled.

'How about you, Akira-san?'

Akane was just about to decline when the boy beside her spoke up.

'He's not allowed to go out tonight.'

She stared at him, open-mouthed. Anger sparked within her as he looked at her in challenge.

'Actually, I would like to join you,' she turned back to the other men. She just started walking towards them when she felt a hand wrap around her upper arm firmly.

'I said you're not allowed to go out,' Akane inwardly flinched at the look on his face. His voice was cold and there was authority simmering beneath his smiling facade. It was the first time he looked at her that way. They stared at each other for a moment before she finally looked back at their companions who have started shifting uncomfortably in front of them.

'I remembered I have something to do after all. I have to help Okita-san with something,' she said, smiling back at the group. They all nodded and walked away, murmuring a little to themselves. She looked back at him then at the hand that was holding her arm. He let her go.

'Let's go back,' he simply said before walking away.

She stared at the ground as they walked in uncomfortable silence. A dull spot in her heart ached. The tension in the air was too high.

'Why did you do that?' she finally had the courage to ask.

Okita kept silent beside her for a moment but what he said next squeezed her heart with an unfamiliar emotion.

'Because I don't trust you.'

She realized what the feeling was after a couple of seconds.

It was pain.

\* \* \*

><p>Akane stared at the ground in front of her. It was around midnight and she had spent the last couple of hours tossing and turning in bed. After a while, she finally gave up and just decided to go out for some fresh air. Luckily, her room was just near the steps leading to the yard. She wrapped her sleeping kimono and robe around her tightly and sat down on the uppermost stair.</p>

\_ 'Because I don't trust you.' \_

She closed her eyes as that one phrase repeated unwittingly in her mind. She knew there were still some people in this place who still didn't fully trust her. There were times when Sannan looked at her as if there was something going on in his mind that he just didn't want to say because it wasn't polite and there were those brief moments when Hijikata scrutinize her first with his sharp eyes before asking her to do something. Still, she took that as normal. Akane placed her hand over her heart and tried to analyze the pain there.

\_ Is it because he was the last one she least expected to say that to her? He was always so teasing and playful towards her that she did not think for one second that he was harboring those feelings. More importantly, why is it affecting her so much? Why is \_\_\*\*he\*\*\_\_ affecting her so much? \_

'Can't sleep?'

She yelped faintly and jumped a little from her seat. Life is really taunting her, she thought, as she saw the very boy troubling her thoughts leaning on the banister of the stairs. He was staring ahead with a serene look on his face, his hair lit up by the moonlight.

She composed herself and turned away from him.

'Why am I seeing more of you today than the number of times I've seen you in the past few weeks I've been here, Okita-san?' she asked. She hugged her knees and rested her chin there. She felt too tired to argue with him tonight.

'I actually also don't know,' he answered with laughter in his voice.

She stared ahead. He kept silent. Okita watched the moonlight play on her black hair that seemed to make it look like silver. She had a sad, faraway expression on her brown eyes that were usually only sparkling with innocence, laughter, and sometimes anger whenever she trained them on him. He was startled out of his reverie when she

suddenly spoke out.

'Why do you hate me?'

He straightened a little from his leaning position out of shock. There was such sadness in her voice that stirred something deep within him.

'Who said I hate you?'

'You always make fun of me in front of the other captains,' she stopped as if thinking whether to continue or not. 'You don't trust me.'

Ah. So that's what's been bothering her. \_

It took him a while to answer. He rested his elbows again on the banister and looked at the moon.

'You're hiding something, aren't you?'

That made Akane widen her eyes. So many things started running in her mind all at the same time, stopping her from answering the question.

'I know you do. I can see it in your eyes. You're like an open book with those eyes of yours,' he said in his usual teasing voice though she noted the seriousness of his tone. She would have lied to him, tell him it isn't true. A part of her, however, seemed to stop her from telling him nothing but the truth.

'You see, all of us here are brothers. We live and breathe for one cause. We fight not for our lives but for what we believe in. In a way, you can say that the secret of one is the secret of all.'

Akane hugged her knees to her a little closer. His words stung. Guilt ate her from the inside. Yes, she's staying here because she wants to live. To find her friends so that they can all go back together from where they came from. She just realized that in a way, she was using them. She was not fighting for a cause or for something she believed in.

She was selfish.

'I'm sorry,' she mumbled, her words a little muffled as she buried her face deeper against her knees. She wanted to tell him everything but she doubt he will believe her. She was afraid of him rejecting the only truth she can offer.

He heard him straighten up.

'I'm sorry too if I can't trust you. Yet,' he said, his words unnaturally gentle.

She nodded and settled her gaze on the well beyond the yard. Her sight was suddenly blocked, however, by something red and rectangle. Akane leaned back her head and saw him standing behind her, dangling a red thing on her face. She looked at it and hesitantly took it from him. It looked like an Omamori amulet traditionally given away as souvenirs from temples.

'I got that from Osaka. There was this old lady who cornered me and dragged me to the temple while I was walking around. She forced me to give a donation and gave that to me in exchange for the money she literally forced out of my pockets.'

Akane continued staring at it then shifted her gaze at him.

'This is for me?'

He looked away from her with an embarrassed expression so uncharacteristic of him it nearly took her off track. She even thought he saw a dust of pink on his cheeks.

'I told you I have something to show you earlier, didn't I? You refused to look at me properly during breakfast though. Look, just keep it okay? I have no one else to give it to anyway. They don't believe in those kinds of things here.'

She couldn't help but smile at him suddenly. He looked even more attractive when he's embarrassed, she thought.

'Thank you, Okita-san,' she said to him earnestly. He looked down at her again, also surprised at her gentle voice. After a moment, he smiled. It wasn't a smirk or a grin. It was a real smile.

'You're welcome.'

She looked at the amulet and tried to read the golden letters embroidered on the silk cloth.

'What is this amulet for?'

'The woman said it was an en-musubi.'

'Enâ€|musubiâ€|What does it do?'

He stared at her for a moment before answering. Okita cleared his throat, looked away, and touched the back of his head awkwardly.

'She said, 'for the acquisition of a mate and a prosperous marriage.''

She nearly dropped the piece of cloth in her hands. She felt herself burning.

'W-why are you giving me this?!" she asked, scandalized and embarrassed at the same time.

'Because I have no one else I can pass it on to and I don't want to waste my money! The old woman forced it on me saying '\_a young and energetic man like you shouldn't waste his time and look for a wife immediately!\_ Then he forced that on my hands! Who do you expect me to give it to anyway! Saitou?!' he retaliated, looking as embarrassed himself.

She continued staring at him for a while then sighed.

'Still, thank you,' she mumbled. He huffed his acknowledgement. The

silence that followed was still awkward but it was different from the one they shared earlier when they were walking home. After a while, he finally turned and made a motion to walk away.

'You should go to sleep now. It's late already.'

She nodded. 'I'll sleep in a while,' Akane shyly said.

'I'll get going then.'

'Hai.'

He had already taken a couple of steps when he stopped and turned to her once more.

'Hey.'

She looked at him.

'I don't hate you. If I do, you'd be dead by now,' he stopped reluctantly for a couple of seconds before continuing. 'The people I tease? They are actually the ones that I like.'

Her blush from earlier still hasn't subsided yet but she found herself getting awed at her body's capacity to burn when she flushed bright red again. Okita noticed and his lips turned upwards in his usual smirk.

'Good night, kitten,' he winked at her before finally turning and disappearing around a turn in the corridor.

Akane looked after him, still in shock. She cannot fathom how a man can turn from teasing, to cruel, to embarrassed, to arrogant so fast. He was like rain. Drizzle one second, then a full blown thunderstorm the next minute.

And that rain? It was currently raging a typhoon inside her right now.

## 11. Chapter 11: Gazes and Blushes

A/N: Chapter 11! I had two reviews requesting something so decided to put this up tonight. Thanks to my loyal reviewers, Allylovesedward, Redstar8, and chikagefan (saw your review, girl, but I am so getting frustrated because is not counting it in the total number of reviews of the story!)! Welcome also aboard Silverdragon98! You all made my day! anyway, nothing much happened this chapter so go easy on me, kay?

P.S. Hakuouki is not mine but Akane and Sakura are my babies. :)

\* \* \*

><p>The smell of cooking wafted deliciously from the small kitchen window into the sunlit-washed yard. Akane grabbed another carrot from the basin where she soaked them earlier and chopped the vegetable with a flourish.</p>

'Eggs, please.'

She reached for the tray of fresh eggs on her side and gave it to Harada with a smile. She placed the minced carrots on the bowl and pushed it towards him.

'Want me to help you with that?' she asked, peeking over his shoulder at what he's doing.

'I'm good. Better take care of the soup. Soup is important,' he winked at her. She laughed. Akane was no cook but ever since she arrived at this place, she found preparing food as one of the things that help her relax. The warmth of the kitchen and the familiar sight of pots and pans hanging on the wall strangely put her mind at ease. She figured because it's the one place in the big household that looked tame, peaceful, and normal. The headquarters of the Shinsengumi, after all, is not the homiest place on earth.

Being partners with Harada is also another thing she's thankful of. He had been nothing but a gentleman in all the times they've been together. His cheerfulness, surprising lack of intimidating aura, and openness made her warm up to him almost immediately. Soon enough, she also found herself trading jokes with him.

'Hey, Akane. What was your first impression of me?'

Akane looked up from the soup she was stirring. Small conversations like these were already normal between them but she couldn't help but be surprised at his strange question.

'Why are you asking, Harada-san?'

'Nothing really. Just curious.'

'Hmmpf!' she turned back towards the stove, trying to find the right words to describe him. 'I was scared of you,' she finally said. Harada gave a bark of laughter behind her.

'You were scared of me? That's quite alarming.'

'Well, you can't really blame a girl for getting scared when a pack of men wielding swords captures her in the middle of the forest, can you?' she looked back at him, her eyebrow raised playfully. He scrunched his face good-naturedly and nodded.

'You have a point there.'

'Why are you asking anyway? I'm sure there's a reason.'

He sighed. 'Because Shinpachi is always going on about how much popular I am than him. He told me last night that if there is just another man here who can match his drinking level other than me, he would gladly leave me behind because I was always stealing the attention from him,' he said with an exasperated look on his face.

Akane couldn't help but laugh. 'I guess you do have a certain appeal to the ladies.'

'You think so?'

'Uh-huh.'

'But you didn't think I was handsome at first, right?'

'Let's just say the circumstances did not allow me to appreciate your attractiveness when we first met,' she smiled at him cheekily.

He chuckled softly. 'Or maybe you were just different. You've always been different from other women.'

Akane looked up from what she was doing and turned towards him, shocked at the tone of his voice. He sounded as if he was reminiscing something. He was still focused on what he was doing but she noticed a slight smile on his lips.

'That did not make me feel any better,' she said and looked at her men's clothes.

He looked at her and slyly smiled. 'What I actually meant to say is that you're different in a good way.'

She blushed.

'Stop teasing me, Harada-san.'

'I am terribly serious,' he answered with a Cheshire grin on his face that made her burn brighter. He threw back his head and laughed when he noticed her discomfort.

'You're so cute when you blush like that.'

'Stop making fun of me,' she stuck her tongue at him.

'Alright, alright. I'm sorry. Now continue with your soup, girl.'

She smiled at him before turning back to what she was cooking. A comfortable silence descended upon them. After a while, she decided to ask, 'How about you, Harada-san? What did you think of me when you first saw me?'

'Me? Uh-oh! I thought you were weird because of your clothes.' She laughed at that.

'But really, I felt scared for you when I was watching you in the middle of that training room with Souji. You looked so frail and small; I was so sure you will get crushed.'

She wrinkled her nose as she remembered that day. 'Yeah, that was what I was thinking too.'

'But turns out you know how to handle yourself, huh?'

Akane shrugged. 'I was just lucky because there was a bow there. I'm sure the sadist--' she suddenly stopped as she thought of Okita. After their embarrassing talk that night, she couldn't bring herself to call him a 'sadist' very often. The way he looked so embarrassed when he gave her the amulet sort of changed her view of him. 'I'm sure that Okita-san wouldn't have had second thoughts of cutting me to ribbons if I didn't fight.'

'Well that's Souji for you,' Harada laughed and went to the other stove beside her. He poured all the ingredients in the cooking pot and started stirring.

'But you know, he's a great guy.'

Akane kept her head bowed low to hide the smile that tugged her lips. That was one fact she had slowly started warming up to in the past few days. Sure he still teases her every time they see each other but she also noticed that her antagonistic feelings towards him have lessened for some reason. Maybe it was the way he looked at her that caused something to change, she thought. His eyes still held their usual mischievous look but they were no longer mocking. As a result, she doesn't feel the constant need to throw a table at him all the time. In fact, she found herself wanting to hide *\*\*under a table\*\** every time he looks at her because of her heart doing a weird tap dance against her chest every single moment that his eyes land on her.

'You are all great guys, Harada-san,' she said, still hiding her face.

'Just call me Sano, okay?' he said and reached over to pat her head. She looked at him and smiled.

'Will that be okay?'

He nodded. 'You make me feel too old when you call me that,' he winked at her.

She laughed. 'Alright, Sano-san.'

\* \* \*

><p>Souji was on his way to the training room when she heard musical laughter float from the kitchen. He smiled to himself as he immediately recognized the voice and silently looked forward to breakfast today. Most captains feel at ease whenever she was the one cooking. There is just something different about the food when it's prepared by a woman, he thought. He was just about to pass the door when he heard a low laugh come from the room. He suddenly remembered that Akane is Sano's cooking partner. Unwittingly, he felt himself slowing down and leaning on the wall just outside the door of the kitchen.<p>

'But really, I felt scared for you when I was watching you in the middle of that training room with Souji. You looked so frail and small; I was so sure you will get crushed,' he heard Sano say.

\_Huh, so they're talking about me?\_

'Yeah, that was what I was thinking too.'

\_Figured that out.\_

'But turns out you know how to handle yourself, huh?'

'I was just lucky because there was a bow there. I'm sure the sadisâ€"I'm sure that Okita-san wouldn't have had second thoughts of

cutting me to ribbons if I didn't fight.'

He scowled at that.

\_Was I really that bad to her? I wasn't actually planning on killing a girl. I was just trying to have some fun. \_

'Well that's Souji for you. But you know, he's a great guy.'

He smiled.

\_You tell her, Sano-san.\_

'You are all great guys, Harada-san.'

Souji's forehead wrinkled a little.

\_Can't the girl give me credit on my own?\_

'Just call me Sano, okay?'

His frown deepened.

\_Oh, since when did you two get so \_\_\*\*close\*\*\_\_?\_

'Will that be okay?'

\_NO.\_

'You make me feel too old when you call me that,' he heard her laughing with her soft voice again.

\_She doesn't laugh like that when she's with me. She doesn't even do anything but glare at me. \_He thought, clearly sulking now.

'Alright, Sano-san.'

Souji pushed off from his position and stomped towards the training room, not even minding if the two heard him or not. When he opened the door, Saitou did a double take when he saw his expression.

'Bad morning?' he asked.

'Shut up Saitou Hajime and just fight me.'

He thought he saw a knowing smile fleet across his friend's face before he pulled a wooden sword.

\* \* \*

><p>'According to Yamazaki, there is a group that has been aggressively recruiting members in the outskirts of Kyoto. They call themselves <em>Kageno senshi Tachi.</em>'

'The shadow warriors,' everyone looked at Sannan from Hijikata. After finishing breakfast, the vice-commander immediately called for a meeting. Yamazaki has just returned from his investigation in the borders of Kyoto where a string of murders had recently taken place.

'Who are these guys? Are they pro-Choushoo bastards?' Shinpachi asked.

Hijikata shook his head somberly.

'That was the problem. It seems like this new group is unaffiliated.'

The group of men looked at each other with that piece of information. There is nothing even more dangerous than having an enemy whose aim you don't know.

'Should we enter the scene even if we do not know what their objective is? They may be allies,' Harada asked.

'I doubt that. A supporter of the government wouldn't start a homicide spree,' Souji answered. Beside him, Sannan nodded his head gravely.

'We may not know much about them except for one thing. According to Yamazaki, this group is planning to assassinate the emperor.'

The group visibly became alert at his statement.

'When?' Saitou asked from his seat.

Sannan continued looking at them with a grim expression on his face.

'Tomorrow.'

'What?!"

'Yamazaki reported that the group has started moving towards the heart of the city last night. He heard that they will be meeting with another independent group who they are planning to merge with tonight. They will attack tomorrow evening.'

'We have to stop them before it's too late,' Heisuke said.

'Unfortunately, that's not all.' Hijikata spoke up from his seat. 'Yamazaki also heard the group talking about transporting a special medicine and distributing it to the others they will be meeting with. He said there is a huge chance that they were talking about the Water of Life.'

'The ochimizu?!"

'You mean to say that this groupâ€"'

'Yes. Whoever is controlling this faction is the one who is behind the creation of the new group of rasetsus,' Hijikata said with deathly calm.

Silence descended the group of men. Finally, Souji decided to break the tension.

'So what's the plan?'

'We attack tonight, what else?' Heisuke looked around his comrades, waiting for confirmation.

'If the group is really planning to meet and merge with another independent faction, we cannot take all of them alone. We need the help of the Aizu clan,' Sannan answered him. 'We have already relayed the message to them this morning. Unfortunately, they are not willing to help unless we give them proof.'

Shinpachi scoffed and hit the floor with his fist.

'Those guys! They are still unwilling to take on the muck themselves and always leave all the dirty work to us!'

'What are we going to do?' Saitou asked.

'We need to give them proof. Then they'll help us.'

'Yeah, and how do we do that?'

Sannan adjusted his glasses on the bridge of his nose.

'The men will probably meet in a bar somewhere here so as not to raise too much suspicion. Our best move is to infiltrate them from the inside.'

'That'd be easy. It'll be a piece of cake for Yamazaki,' Heisuke said.

'Unfortunately, we can't use him. They will probably talk in a private room and the best he will be able to do is to listen to them from the next room. Even that will not guarantee that he will catch everything. They also cannot see us. If the other group they will be meeting is from around here, they already probably know our faces,' Hijikata explained.

The group fell into silence.

'If we want to investigate properly, we should find a way for one of us to be in the room with them,' Saitou said.

'Yes, but how do you do that? Unless one of us can disguise as a maiko and spend the night pouring the bastards some sake,' Harada said. Sannan trained his sharp eyes at him with his sentence. The others noticed and stared back at him. Silence enveloped the room until finally something seemed to have finally snapped and everyone caught up with their lieutenant's silent message.

'You can't--we can't use her,' Harada asked him, aghast.

'She is our only chance,' the bespectacled man answered calmly.

'It's too dangerous for her!' Heisuke nearly jumped from his seat.

Okita clutched the handle of his sword. He decided to keep silent though as he struggled with the idea of Akane being alone in a room full of criminals. Somehow, it made his blood boil.

'Is there no other way?' Saitou asked. He looked a little worried himself. 'She is not that well-trained with the sword yet and she can't obviously bring her bow there. She is not well-equipped in protecting herself if something goes wrong.'

Sannan looked at Hijikata who has kept silent on his seat. His face showed disapproval but there is a tinge of resignation on his face. Souji watched the two closely as they briefly stared at each other. Their expressions clearly showed that they've already talked about the matter even before they relayed the problem to them.

'We will all be there surrounding the perimeter so she will not be really alone. All she has to do is to listen and watch. When she notices something unusual, she will alert us and we will take it from there. Everything should go along fine if she'll be careful enough,' the vice-captain said.

'But Hijikata-san-' Heisuke tried to cut in.

'Of course we will have to ask her permission about this,' Hijikata continued, now looking at Sannan. 'If she doesn't agree to it, we'll have no choice but to look for another alternative.'

The bespectacled man inclined his head a little as if to acknowledge the message behind his comrade's statement. They will not force anyone do something against their will. Souji found himself chuckling without humor to himself.

'That doesn't change anything, Hijikata-san. You know that girl won't say no to this,' he said. The others all looked at him. Of course they knew he was right.

\* \* \*

><p>'Listen, Akane. All you have to do is listen to them, pour sake, listen to them, pour sake, maybe laugh a little here and there-but control the cuteness okay-? Or they will harass you. That's all. Very easy, huh?'<p>

Akane laughed a little and looked at the boy standing in front of her. He had been babbling assurances to her for almost twenty minutes now. They were currently in the steps leading to the yard near her room. The sun was setting down beyond the horizon, washing the surroundings with a golden orange glow.

'Yes, Heisuke-san. I know. You don't have to worry.'

'Of course we have to worry. It feels so wrong sending you there,' Shinpachi who is leaning on the post beside her mumbled.

'Are you sure about this, Akane? You can say still say no,' Harada peered at her with a concerned look on his face.

'Yes. Hijikata-san said I just have to listen to them, right? It's not dangerous at all,' she smiled at him.

'I'm not surprised at your reaction at all. Having a sense of self-preservation doesn't seem to be one of your strongest points,' Okita said from the foot of the stairs. Akane looked at him and was

startled a little at the unfamiliar emotion behind the eyes staring at her. He looked away before she can grasp what it is though.

They all looked up when they heard footsteps down the hall.

'Akira-chaaaan!'

Akane's eyes widened as she saw the server from the restaurant they met a couple of weeks ago. She ran towards them, pulled her from her sitting position and hugged her tightly. She briefly noticed Heisuke jump a foot when he saw the newcomer before hiding behind Shinpachi's back.

'S-Sakura-chan, why are you here?' she was barely able to ask as the girl tackled her.

'Oh, Saitou-san fetched me! He told me I have to make you pretty today!' she beamed at her. 'I'm really sorry for what happened in the restaurant when you visited. Heisuke-kun explained to me everything,' she held her shoulders and looked her in the eyes. 'Your secret is safe with me,' she said with a serious expression on her face that lasted for about five seconds before she whipped her head towards Heisuke. 'Right Heisuke-kun?'

The boy yelped and peeked at her from behind Shinpachi's back.  
'H-haiâ€|'

'Oy, Hajime-kun. Why'd you bring her here?' Souji called out to this friend, looking at the girl who has started babbling at a clearly confused Akane about hairstyles and make-up.

'She's the only one who knows about her real gender. We have no other choice,' the captain of the third division answered. He turned to the girl. 'You should probably start preparing now. We have all the things you'll need in her room.'

Sakura clapped her hands together. 'Yes! This is going to be so much fun! It has always been my dream to dress up someone, you know? I don't have any sisters so I didn't have the opportunity till now. Don't worry, Akane-chan, I'm good at this. I swear. We'll have so much fun!' she exclaimed and pulled Akane towards the room that Saitou pointed her to. The captains merely looked after them in silence.

'I'm so glad I'm a guy,' Harada said after a while. The others just grunted their approval.

\* \* \*

><p>Saitou wiped a cloth over his sword for the nth time and let the blade gleam under the moonlight. Harada was staring unseeingly at him from his position in the stairs, unconsciously tapping his fingers on the handle of his spear. Both Shinpachi and Heisuke were alternating standing up, sitting again, and yawning. Souji had his eyes trained on Akane's door which is now illuminated by candlelight from the inside. His gaze followed the shadows that were moving behind it.<p>

'How much longer are they going to take? It's been three hours

already,' Shinpachi called out, stifling a yawn.

'The meeting starts at 9. We barely have an hour to go there,' Harada added, still staring at Saitou's gleaming blade.

As if in answer to their complaints, the door of the room suddenly opened with a bang that made them all start a little in surprise. They all stared at the door now spilling golden light. After a few moments, Sakura emerged looking devilishly pleased with herself.

Heisuke swallowed and inched closer to Harada.

'Are you sure Akane's still alive?' he whispered. Harada shook his head silently.

The girl started chuckling evilly and placed her hands on her waist.

'I hope you're ready for this,' she said, squinting her eyes at them. They only stared at her.

'Akane-chan, come out now. You've got to show them how you look,' she called inside the room in a singsong voice.

They heard shuffling from inside, then a small voice.

'Sakura-chan, I think this is too much. Maybe we can remove some of the make-up?'

Sakura merely shook her head. Then she stuck her hand inside the room and pulled.

What happened next was like a chain reaction. Heisuke who was about to climb a step missed and fell towards Shinpachi who was pushed towards Harada whose arm unconsciously jerked and caused the wooden handle of his spear to swing towards Saitou's sword. It hit the handle and Saitou's slack hold on the weapon caused it to fall. The katana fell point first and dug exactly on the wood between Shinpachi's big and small toe. The short haired captain who seemed oblivious of what happened, merely murmured an 'Ouchâ€!', his eyes still staring ahead.

Only Souji, whose eyes were also riveted on the girl in front of him, seemed to be the only one untouched.

Akane shifted uncomfortably under the gazes of the men in front of her. She was wearing a cream colored kimono sparsely designed with patterns of red rose petals here and there. Her slim waist which was usually hidden by the loose hakama she wears everyday was now emphasized by the obi wrapped daintily around it. Her hair was put up in the usual nihon-gami style with beautiful kanzashi hair accessories framing her heart shaped face. She felt thankful for the light white powder that Sakura dusted on her face as she felt herself blushing maddeningly. Her brown eyes were lined with thin black liner and her lips which were painted a dark red stood out.

The discomfort finally got the best of her and she looked up at the group in front of her. She tried stopping herself from flinching when her eyes met their gazes.

'Is it that bad?' she asked, wincing.

'Huh?' Heisuke asked, his jaw slack.

Suddenly, someone whacked him on the head from behind. Akane saw Sakura patting a folding fan against her hand. How she managed to get there, she doesn't have any idea. But her sudden attack seemed to have brought back the men to reality.

'I worked so hard on her and you only make her uncomfortable by staring at her like hormonal boys. My, my. Never thought the captains of the great Shinsengumi of Kyoto are like this,' the girl said from behind them. Heisuke blushed furiously at her statement.

'Hey, I'm not h-hormonal! Akane! Please don't mind her! It's just that, you look really beautiful in that outfit!' he stammered.

'Yeah. You're like a real maiko,' Shinpachi added, his mouth still awkwardly open.

Harada simply smiled at her and gave her a thumbs up. She couldn't help but blush even more.

'Thank you for the compliments,' she bowed.

'Heehhhâ€| she even talks and moves like a real maiko now! I'm so proud of you Akane-chan! I'm so proud of you!' Sakura screeched, grasped Heisuke's kimono, and started wringing him.

Saitou finally cleared his throat and pulled his sword which is still dangerously wedged between Shinpachi's toes.

'We better get going now. We still have to walk to the city. Suzuki-san, please escort her. We'll be following a little ways behind to make sure you're both safe,' he said to Sakura who finally stopped shaking a dying Heisuke in her arms.

'Haaaaai!' the girl cheerfully said and ran towards Akane. She grabbed her hands and started towing her. Akane tried her best to catch up with her awkward sandals. As they passed the other captains by the stairs, her eyes caught Okita's green ones that were following her with a dazed look in them. Time seemed to go in slow motion as she stared back at them. Then Sakura finally gave her a rough pull that broke their connection.

'Akane-chan, we have to hurry! Come on!'

The captains watched them cross the yard then finally disappear through the gates. After a few moments, Harada stood up from his seat and rested his spear casually over his shoulder.

'Let's go? We can't let them go that far. A girl like that is a magnet for both wanted and unwanted attention,' he said.

The other captains grunted their approval, stood up from their positions, and started moving towards the gate, still looking a little out of sorts. Saitou stopped after a few steps, however, when he noticed Okita still sitting on the step, looking

ahead.

'Souji?'

He looked up at him with a mildly confused look in his eyes.

'Yes?'

Saitou blinked at his friend. Finally, he smiled and shook his head a little. He walked back towards the first division captain who stood from his seat upon his approach but still remained planted on his position.

'Let's go. She's waiting for you,' he said as he placed a hand on the other boy's back and pushed him gently forward.

## 12. Chapter 12: A Clash of Swords

A/N: Chapter 12 is finally up! It took me a while to finish this so I hope you will forgive me if you think this arc is taking too long. I don't want to post chapters longer than 5,000 words so I decided to cut this one. Again, again, thank you for all the reviews and welcome to the new followers! To my three loyal reviewers (you know who you are!), you all rock! Anyway, is there someone out there who's got killer sketching talents? Can you please sketch Akane for me if you have time? haha. dunno, i just thought it would be really cool to have my original character interpreted.

P.S. currently typing the next chapter now. Might post it sooner than planned. :)

\* \* \*

><p>'I say more sake! We need more sake for this occasion!'<p>

Akane kept her head bowed low and tried her best not to spill the alcohol she was pouring as the man holding the cup beside her drowsily staggered left and right. She put down the bottle and stared politely at the floor afterwards. Sakura told her that staring people in the face is considered rude for maikos. Thus, she tried to compensate by keeping her ears alert and picking up even the littlest thing uttered within the room. Thankfully, this wasn't a very hard thing to do for her. After all, she had all the practice she needed with the multiple voices plaguing her in her head while she was still young.

'This is for the birth of the new Kageno senshi Tachi!' the man across from her sat up from his position and raised his sakazuki cup in the air. The others around him also raised their cups to answer his toast, their raucous laughter and slurred statements joining together into a great ball of noise.

'With the help of our new benefactor, it will be easy for us to take over Kyoto. We will start the greatest era Japan has ever seen. We will be the new lords of the land!'

'Hai!'

Akane tried her best to keep her face from showing her disgust. Ambition, when too much, is a deadly thing, she thought. It is an incurable disease that will eat you from the inside and poison you until it leaves you cold and soulless. Though they have not bluntly expressed their aim to assassinate the emperor in the past half hour she has been there, there is no doubt that the men in the room are planning an attack against the shogunate.

She felt her hands twitch involuntarily and tried to cover them by putting them on her side, underneath her flowing kimono. Besides from just spying about the target's plans, Hijikata also specifically told her to try to pick up something about the ochimizu and the mastermind behind it. Once she got something valuable, she just needs to excuse herself, and flash the small round mirror she had hidden in her obi to signal her group camouflaged in the trees surrounding the ochaya. A messenger from the Aizu clan who is waiting with their group of soldiers will immediately run to their base to get reinforcements.

Akane felt sweat starting to form on her nape as the complexity of things silently nagged her. Her timing is very crucial tonight. With the Shinsengumi still trying to keep the ochimizu a secret, she has to give the signal early enough for the messenger to get reinforcements and her group to attack their targets while they still haven't taken the medicine. She also felt a little frustrated at the final instruction for her to hide in a room after she gives the signal. Though she tried to argue that she wants to join the fighting, the vice-commander shut her down, saying that she can't possibly properly fight being dressed as a maiko.

She inwardly sighed and looked up as the man beside her said something. She didn't catch a word he said so she just decided to give him a soft laugh instead. It worked. The man leaned back, looking pleased with himself.

'Once this thing is over, I will buy your freedom. A pretty face like you is too good for this kind of place,' he said after taking a sip on his cup. She estimated him to be around his mid-thirties. He had a portly stomach and a round face now tinged with red due to the alcohol. From what she heard, he is one of the generals of the group. Akane tried her best to stop herself from shivering under the blatantly lewd looks he was giving her.

'That would be amazing. I hope you finish whatever project it is you're working on as soon as possible. I will be waiting for you, sir,' she sweetly said, deciding to play along with him. So far she hasn't heard anything other than hot air from the men around her. She needed to gather solid information before she leads the others to a full-blown attack.

She needed to do something.

'You can trust on that, my beauty. After this, I will be one of the most powerful shoguns in Japan. Won't you like to be the mistress of a man like that?' he sneered and leaned a little towards her. Akane leaned back, put her hands against his chest and playfully pushed him away.

'It would be my honor to be the woman of a man of power,' she said breathily. 'But wouldn't it be dangerous for you? This thing you will

be doing, won't it cause you grave dangers?' she gazed at him from under her lashes, trying to keep her expression embarrassed and worried.

The man blinked at her for a couple of times, his mouth slightly open. It was all she could do not to grin at the way he's letting himself be easily controlled.

'No. I mean, yes. It is dangerous,' the man pulled back and leered at her. 'But the more dangerous it is, the greater the glory, right?'

She chuckled. 'Yes, I agree with that. It has always been my wish to meet a man that can equal, if not surpass, the glory of our emperor. It's a wild dream of a poor girl like me.'

The man threw back his head, laughed, then tossed back the rest of the sake in his cup to his mouth.

'Our emperor? His time is numbered. In just a few weeks, Kyoto will fall to our hands. You see, we have just the right weapon that will bring the shogunate to their knees.'

Her ears perked up and she felt her body tense a little. Just a little more prodding and he'll be spilling everything. She inconspicuously looked around to see if anyone is giving them any attention but everyone seemed to be distracted. She turned back to him and tried to make her face look scared and worried.

'That sounds really scary. You won't burn the city down, will you? I don't want to lead a life amidst a new war.'

'Oh, no, no. Remember, you only get a war when the two parties are near equal in power. This thing that will be coming? It will leave everyone who will try to oppose stripped of everything even before they get the sense to realize what's happening. A bottle of medicine. A bottle of medicine, my love. With just that, we will turn things around!' he made a gesture with his pointer finger and thumb to describe the bottle he was talking about. Akane's eyes narrowed a little.

\_The ochimizu. \_

'My, my. That sounds promising. Is it you, sir, who created this miracle medicine? I should remember to thank you properly then,' she said, pouring him some sake once more. He drank all of it in one go.

'No, I am merely in charge of its distribution. But distribution is still very important, no?' he said, looking at her and waiting for her approval. She nodded her head and smiled at him.

'You must have been here and there. You look like a very busy man.'

The man laughed, looking arrogantly proud once more. 'I've been to Edo and Nara. We will be starting soon on Osaka. If you want, you can go with me there. I will give you a vacation worthy of a queen.'

'You are too kind. I'd love to, sir,' she said, bowing politely.

He motioned for her to give him more sake and she obliged. If he continues to guzzle alcohol as fast as this, it will not take him too long to collapse on his face, she thought. She needed to milk information from him while he's still coherent.

'May I ask a question? This medicine, you say it is something that is incredibly effective, right? It's just thatâ€¦I have a younger sister. She is very sick. I was just wondering if the provider of your medicine offers something that can help us cure her,' she looked at him with innocent and expectant eyes. It seemed to have worked because his face softened and his brow creased.

'What is it that your sister is plagued with?'

'We still do not know. That is why I need to find someone who is incredibly good at this science. No doctor was successful in curing her.'

'Hmph. I'm sure Ayato-sama can take care of it,' he said. She stopped at the sound of the name. It took her a couple of seconds before she spoke again out of fear of showing excitement in her voice.

'Ayato-sama. Is he a doctor?'

'No. He is the medicine's creator and developer.'

She bowed her head and poured sake on his cup, trying to hide the smile on her lips.

Mission accomplished.\_

'I hope I can meet him. Your Ayato-sama, sir.'

\* \* \*

><p>'Vice-commander.'</p>

Hijikata looked up to find Yamazaki behind him. He was not surprised at all that he did not take notice of the boy's approach until he was only a few feet away from them. His black garb made him easily look like something that is naturally a part of the shadows.

'Yamazaki. How is it?' he asked and trained back his eyes at the closed shoji doors of the restaurant where laughter and music were drifting from. They were currently hidden behind the wide trunk of a tree on the far fringes of the ochaya. Saitou, Souji, and Heisuke were with him along with ten or so men. Shinpachi, Harada, and Sannan were guarding the other sides with their own groups.

'I estimate all of them to be around 60. They are occupying all the rooms on one side of the hallway.'

'And Akane?'

'She was assigned on a room where the generals and the assistants are.'

He nodded.

'That's good.'

'Hijikata-san, I don't feel good about this. It's almost an hour now and she hasn't emerged yet. What if she's already in trouble?'

Heisuke asked agitatedly, scratching his hair in a distracted motion. He was pacing back and forth, muttering to himself.

'There is no need to worry too much. She isn't the only maiko there,' Hijikata merely said, his eyes still on the doors which are about 20 feet away from them. It would have been better if they can stay somewhere closer but they will risk exposing themselves to the people they are watching. The darkness is also not helping too much. He tried not to waver his gaze at the sight in front of him to make sure he won't miss anything. Beside him, Saitou and Souji were also silent, their eyes locked on the doors.

'But she \*\*is the only\*\* maiko who looks like \*\*that\*\* there,' the young captain reasoned out. He stopped walking, waiting for any reaction from his comrades. When he received nothing, he just ruffled his hair again and continued pacing.

Souji ran his thumb on the hilt of his sword once more to keep his mind from straying the way Heisuke's is doing. He felt the muscles on his shoulders tense and his fingers itching to do something. He didn't have any idea how he got in their current place as he seemed to have walked in a daze earlier, but everything came rushing back to him once they've taken their hiding places and Heisuke started rambling about 'hands straying', 'obi falling off,' and drunk men inappropriately grabbing certain body parts. There was an uncomfortable knot on his stomach that seemed to be spreading slowly up to his chest and arms with every passing second and the eight division captain's mutterings were not helping. His mind was currently racing with bad, dark thoughts and his heart has started beating erratically against his chest. He stopped for a moment and tried to give names to the emotions running through his veins.

It was worry. And concern. Pure, intense, bordering on hysterical concern.

He found himself silently asking why he was feeling that way but he immediately found the answers even before he can finish the question.

\_With a face like that, anyone will have the urge to touch her.  
—

\_She's unarmed and outnumbered. \_

\_She's in danger. \_

\_One wrong move and she's done. \_

He gritted his teeth as the idea of someone touching her flitted across his mind. To keep his brain from completely going blank, he decided to grab the lowest branch just a little higher than the level of his shoulder and wrapped his palm there. The roughness of the bark

brought back a little sense to him.

'Something might be happening right this very minute while we're waiting. She might be gagged and bound this very moment. Then they'll have all the freedom to do anything to her there,' Heisuke muttered to himself behind him.

Crack.

Saitou looked at the man beside him who seemed to have crushed a not so thin twig from the branch he was currently gripping.

'Heisuke, keep quiet!' Hijikata hissed as he looked back at the boy.

Suddenly, they saw light flash from the darkness. All members of the group visibly tensed at the sight. One flash. Then a second one. They all held their breaths for the last one, their hands on the hilts of their swords. Akane had to do three signals before they can attack.

Before they even saw the third flash, however, they saw the light of the mirror swallowed by something dark. Then they saw a dozen or so pieces of light falling to the ground.

It took them a while to realize what was happening. When they all figured it out, the captains all charged in unison despite of not saying anything to one another.

The mirror has shattered into small pieces. And from the dark movement of shape beyond, they can tell that its former holder is now being dragged back by someone tall and strong.

\* \* \*

><p>It didn't take Akane long to finally pour the last drop of sake into the man's cup. Taking the chance to finally excuse herself, she murmured a quick excuse to him, taking the Tokkuri jug with her. She closed the door carefully behind her and silently trodded to the hallway to the spot where she knew Hijikata and the others are waiting across. She faced the small garden, pulled out the small, round mirror from her obi, and positioned it in such an angle that the light of the moon can reflect from its surface.</p>

She turned it once, twice, and was just about to complete the signal when she felt a hand suddenly grab her upper arm. She gasped and tried to look back but her captor's other hand closed around her mouth, keeping her head in place. Then she felt the hand holding her move to her hand and grasp the mirror she was holding. Akane's eyes widened as he saw the hand close around the mirror's edges tighter and tighter until finally, it shattered into tiny pieces. It took her a while to finally digest what was happening out of shock, only gaining her train of thought as she watched the cuts of the bloody hand heal right before her very eyes.

That was when she started flailing. The last thing that registered to her before the doors of the room she was dragged into closed are the shadows charging towards the place.

'You're brave enough to spy on me, my lady?'

Akane suddenly stopped struggling when a familiar voice whispered against her cheek. The hot flutter of breath against the shell of her ear was a stark contrast to the sudden chill that crept across her body in an instant. She knew that feeling. It was only he who can ignite such a sense of fear within her.

She felt the hand clamped around her mouth loosen. Before it finally let her go, she heard him whisper again, 'If you try as much as whimper, I'll signal all my men to come rushing out of their rooms. You wouldn't want to put your friends at a disadvantage, right? They need the element of surprise.'

She felt her eyes widen and he chuckled before finally letting her go. Akane instantly whipped around once she's free and sure enough, there he is. The black-haired, red-eyed man she met on the alley. His eyes flitted lazily down her body and up, a smirk curling the edges of his mouth. She thought she saw a look of hunger cross his red orbs before it finally settled on her face again.

'Just as I thought. You're lovely.'

She took a couple of steps back.

'You. Are you the person behind all of this?' she asked, her voice hoarse.

He inclined his head and took a step towards her.

'And if I am?'

She raised her chin in an effort to hide her fear.

'We've been looking for you. You're finished now.'

He raised an eyebrow at her before laughing. He took another step which she matched with another retreat of her own.

'You think I'm scared of your fake samurais? You really think they have a chance against me?' he softly said.

'You're planning to take down Kyoto, kill the emperor, and form an army of rasetsus. My friends are the last thing you should worry about. You're an enemy of the country. Everyone will be after you,' she said, trying her best not to show the sudden weakness that enveloped her body. She felt faint. Akane instinctively felt for her waist to get her sword but was only able to clutch the silkiness of cloth. That was when she just remembered that the only weapon she had with her is a thin dagger she had hidden in her obi. The hopelessness of the situation made her dizziness even worse.

'We onis are not under the power of anyone. I'm sure you know that.'

'Why are you doing this?' her eyes had started to blur a little now. She closed them briefly and opened them again.

'Because I need to create a new world for our kind. For decades, us demons have been pushed back into the darkness by humans, forced into hiding. We who have been the lords of them before. I'm just bringing

back what was once lost,' he said, a dangerous light dancing in his eyes. Akane didn't know what she feared more. His mocking attitude or his serious persona.

'Don't you dare say us. I am not like you,' she stared back at him defiantly. He merely smiled at her.

'Those expressions of yours are so beautiful. Such a defiant spirit,' he raised his hand and made a motion as if to run his finger across her cheek. 'It would be so much fun to break you,' he whispered.

Akane flinched even before he touched her and staggered backwards. She felt her heart drop to her stomach, however, when she felt her back hit the cold wall. Before she can move, she saw two arms rest on the wall on either side of her head, effectively caging her body. She looked back wide-eyed at the man in front of her who was currently studying her with such an intensity that made her want to just disappear. He slowly leaned his body forward, his face now just an inch or two from hers.

'Everything you do seem to be taunting me to whisk you away from here now,' he whispered, his eyes ensnaring hers like a magnet. Then his gaze started moving down until it finally rested on her lips. 'I think I've been patient enough. Maybe I should just give in and take you away with me.'

She felt her heart stop as he moved closer and closer, closing the distance between their lips.

\* \* \*

><p>Souji crossed the distance between their hiding place and the yard in a matter of seconds. Beside him, the others were whipping their heads, trying to look for any sign of a soul around them. The hallway still looked deserted, the laughter and voices of the men still safely confined in the private rooms. He looked up when he heard footfalls rushing from his left and found Harada, Shinpachi, and Sannan running towards them with their men tagging behind.</p>

'What happened? We saw the signal but it stopped. We rushed here as soon as possible,' Harada said in a voice barely above a whisper.

'We did too. We saw her being dragged back by someone. She must be in one of the rooms here,' he said, his eyes scanning the surroundings wildly.

'Hijikata-san, what should we do?' Saitou asked the vice-commander beside him.

'Sannan, have you sent off the messenger?' the man inquired, his amethyst eyes sharply roaming the place.

'Yes. The reinforcements will probably arrive in ten minutes at the latest,' Sannan answered.

Hijikata nodded and looked at the captains around him. 'Each one of you, take three men and charge all the rooms in this hallway. We can

probably hold them on our own for a while. Look for Akira as you go along. We have to stop them before they take out the ochimizu.'

All of them nodded and was just about to move when they heard a resounding crash and a muffled groan from the room at the end of the hallway. Souji felt his stomach drop. He recognized the voice. He will recognize it anywhere.

'Captain?' he briefly heard one of the men beside him ask as he stared at the room.

'Souji!' he was shaken from his reverie at the sound of Saitou's voice.

'Go. I'll temporarily cover your place.'

He did not need telling twice. He ran flat out to the end of the hallway and nearly ripped the shoji door open from its frame. He felt his eyes widen as he saw a man leaning against a trembling Akane, his face buried on her neck.

\* \* \*

><p>'Akane! '</p>

Akane looked back in shock at the man outlined against the open door. Earlier, she took the advance of the red-eyed man as her opportunity to whip out her dagger from her obi. A few seconds before he can finally touch his lips to hers, she thrust the blade, effectively digging it onto his stomach. She heard him give a grunt of pain before he collapsed into her. The force caused her to fall a little sideways and hit a crate which toppled and fell to the ground in a loud crash. Akane was just about to push him away when she suddenly felt vibrations on her shoulder where his head currently was. She almost collapsed when she realized what was happening.

He was laughing.

'Not enough, girl. Not enough.'

That was when light suddenly filtered inside the room and the voice of someone shattered through her swelling fear. She felt a ray of hope break through her shell of terror as she recognized the person in front of her.

'Okita-san,' she called out. The next thing that registered to her was the quick flash of a blade and the man jumping away from her. Okita immediately dashed in front of her, his body covering her small form which was still cornered against the wall.

'Are you alright?' she heard him ask in a low, urgent voice. She swallowed the lump of terror stuck on her throat.

'Y-yesâ€|'

'Who are you?' she was only mildly surprised at the fast changing of his tone. His voice sounded cool, almost arrogant as he stared at the person in front of him.

The red-eyed man merely smirked at him and cocked his head as if

entertained at the sight. She barely caught Okita's body tense up in front of her. He knows he is not like the other opponents he had before.

'I'm the one behind all this. Kazama Ayato,' both of them started a little at his bluntness and straightforward answer. Okita was the one who immediately recovered though.

'Nice meeting you, Ayato-san. I'm Okita Souji,' he said, the normal teasing tone tingeing his voice. Then, he smirked. 'I do hope you're ready to die now.'

And just like lightning, he charged towards the black-haired man, his sword glinting in the moonlight.

She didn't know why she even felt surprised at how easily the one called Ayato avoided the attack. He was like dancing in the wind, his sneer still in place as the other man attacked him with precise blows. After a while, he seemed to have gotten tired of the dance and he also pulled the sword from the sheath hanging on his waist. Sparks flew from the two blades as they collided roughly.

'You're good for a human,' Ayato smirked at the other boy.

'I don't know what you're talking about but yes, I am good enough to kill you,' Okita sneered back at him. They jumped away from each other, their gazes both calculating and sharp. Then they charged again. Akane whipped around, looking for something she can use as a weapon. She can now hear screams and sounds of fighting outside. Someone grunted from just outside their open door and she saw a man collapse, his bloody hand letting go of a sword which clattered on the ground. She was just about to dash for it when a voice suddenly stopped her.

'Don't move!'

She stopped in the middle of making another step and looked back at Okita. He was still dueling with Ayato but his eyes were moving towards her every now and then.

'But, Okita-sanâ€"'

'I said don't move! Just stay there!'

The urgency in his voice and the look on his eyes rooted her on the spot. She finally nodded. He moved back his attention to his opponent, pushed him back, and swiped his sword in the place where Ayato's head was just a couple of seconds ago. The man, however, just swiftly avoided the attack. Then he looked at her and the boy in front of him.

'Why are you protecting her?' he asked, his tone of voice so casually curious you would think he's just asking a passerby about the weather. Okita just gave him a bark of laughter.

'That is none of your business, mister.'

Ayato stared at him as if trying to figure him out.

'Oh, but it is. You see, I'm going to take her sooner or

later.'

Akane saw the first captain's stance change at the words of his opponent. A few seconds passed. Then suddenly, he charged with much ardor than before.

'What are you talking about?' Okita hissed, their faces now only separated by their crossed swords.

Ayato scoffed, mildly entertained by the look of pure anger on the other's eyes.

'I'll take her and will never give her back,' he dragged his words slowly, taunting him even more. He saw the boy's eyes widen a little at his words, then narrow back. He watched as a dark cloud seemed to have shadowed the light in them.

What happened was like a flash of lightning. He saw his sword pull back only to swipe him across the face. He was barely able to step back to stop it from lethally cutting him. Then he felt something wet trickle down his cheek. He touched it and looked at his finger.

It was red.

He looked up at the man in front of him who is now heaving heavy pants. He didn't know whether it was from exhaustion or anger but he cocked his eyebrow at him and looked at the sword he was holding.

'You cut me,' he said, a faint trace of amazement in his voice.

Okita laughed. 'I'm just getting started.'

Ayato trained his red eyes at the girl who never moved an inch from her position in the wall.

'Who is he? Why is he protecting you?' he asked, his gaze sharp and demanding. Akane opened her mouth but nothing came out. She also didn't know what to say.

\_Yes. Why are you protecting me?\_

She looked at Okita who had his back slightly angled away from her. He was panting but the look in his eyes told her he is calling for the blood of the man in front of him. Before she can say, do, or even think of anything though, his voice stopped her.

'You know why?' he sneered and raised his hand slowly again, angling his sword in almost the same level to his shoulder. Akane identified the move as the starting position of his signature technique. The Mumyo-ken.

'Because no one is allowed to touch what's mine.'

### 13. Chapter 13: The Incurable Sickness

A/N: Chapter 13 is here! Thank you for all the reviews and welcome to the new followers! I swear I was laughing so hard for minutes when I

read them since all seemed to have the words 'hot' and 'omg' in them. I'm really glad that you're showing me your support for this story. You get even more fired up to write when you know your readers are very vocal about your work, I guess. Anyway, this new chapter is quite long. It was so hard for me to write it to the point that I erased a whole chunk of it and totally replaced it with a new one and changed its direction. Hope you won't get bored with it and not vomit from all the cheeziness. This will probably be my last update in quite a while. May have to update after a week because I'm currently stuck in a plot dead-end right now. Mind giving me suggestions? just send me a personal message. Cheers! :)

\* \* \*

><p>You have finally climbed a cliff, feeling exhausted yet exhilarated at the same time as you gaze at the beautiful summit. Then suddenly, the ground beneath your feet disappeared and you're falling down, rushing downwards at a frightening speed, sure that you're finally just a few seconds away from that deadly impact. Before you hit the ground though, gravity suddenly lost its hold on the planet and you were stuck in mid-air, floating, weightless, clueless of what's happening.</p>

Those can describe the wave of emotions that washed over Akane as Okita's sentence registered to her.

Because no one is allowed to touch what's mine. \_

She felt her forehead crease as she tried to get the meaning behind that single statement. She suddenly seemed aware of every little thing going on around her. The shouts from the room next to them, the sound of breaking china, even the cry of the cicadas outside. She was very much aware of the cold sound of clashing swords as the two men in the room continued their duel, their attacks fiercer and more ferocious than ever. From afar, she heard someone call her name. The sound got closer and closer. Closerâ€¦and closer until the voice sounded as if it was just a couple of feet away from her.

'Akane! '

Akane finally snapped out of her haze and whipped her head towards the door. Heisuke and Shinpachi were standing there, their swords dripping with blood. Their gazes held a mixture of worry, shock, and uncertainty as it moved to her and the men currently fighting in the middle of the room. Her gaze snapped to the pair just in time to see Ayato narrow his eyes at the newcomers. He jumped backwards and stepped a little ways back, regarding the scene in front of him.

'Looks like our little party has just been disrupted,' he said to Souji.

'What? Suddenly got cold feet with the arrival of the new guests?'

Ayato answered the boy's sneer with a smirk of his own.

'Let's just say I don't feel comfortable fighting in front of an audience,' he casually lowered the sword to his side and slipped it

back to its sheath. Souji remained his stance in front of him, looking as alert as ever. Ayato's gaze moved to the girl and smiled at the millions of emotions running through her delicate features.

'I'm still going after you. You know that, don't you?' he called out to her.

She simply stared at him defiantly.

'I'm not afraid of you,' she stopped as if thinking over her words. 'Not anymore.'

He smirked. She really is precious.

'Suit yourself.'

He looked at the man in front of him then who still had his sword poised for attack. He did not scare him though. He's just human after all. His grin widened as he noted the simmering anger in his green eyes.

'Just a piece of advice. If I were you, I'll hold on to her a little tighter from now on. You'll never know when you'll lose her.'

A loud explosion from the back of the ochaya suddenly erupted and broke the deathly silence that suddenly descended the room. Akane and the others felt its force run over the walls and floor, making them nearly lose their balance. When they finally recovered and looked around, there was not even the slightest trace of the red-eyed man left in the room.

'Akane! Souji! Are you alright?'

Heisuke and Shinpachi didn't let another second pass and rushed inside. Heisuke went straight to Akane, took hold of her shoulders and peered worriedly at her face. Shinpachi, on the other hand, ran to Souji to see if he is injured in any way.

'I-I'm fine!' she whispered to the young captain who was still looking at her apprehensively. She tried to force back the lightheaded feeling she felt by briefly squeezing her eyes shut and opening them again.

'Are you injured?'

'No! I'm fine. I'm fine,'

She was just staring at Heisuke's blue-eyed gaze when suddenly, the eight division captain was roughly yanked back and his worried eyes were replaced by troubled green ones.

'Who is that man?'

Akane felt her eyes widen at the expression on Okita's face. He was gazing down at her with the intensity of someone who wants to look straight into the soul of a person. Speechless, she just shook her head at him, her mouth parted a little.

She saw his forehead crease in confusion. Then he looked down at her,

his hands running over her arms, checking for any injuries.

'You're not hurt anywhere?' he urgently asked. His voice sounded uncharacteristically strained.

'N-Noâ€| I'm fine,' she mumbled, still out of sorts. She kept her eyes level with his chest out of fear of meeting his gaze. As Souji slightly moved to the right, Akane caught sight of a tear on the sleeve of his kimono. She gave a small gasp as she saw blood trailing down from the cut. Without thinking, she immediately leaned forward and lightly touched her fingers over the tear's edges now soaked with red.

'Oh no, you're hurt! Are you okay?' she worriedly asked and tried to peer at the wound without actually touching it. When he didn't answer, she decided to look at him to repeat the question. She was rendered speechless, however, when their gazes locked. They just stared at each other's eyes for what seemed like minutes.

Because no one is allowed to touch what's mine. \_

Akane suddenly felt the familiar heat pooling on the apples of her cheeks as his statement echoed in her head again. Strange enough, Souji seemed to have also read her mind as she saw his eyes widen very minutely. The next thing she knew, his cheeks were also flushed. They tore away their gazes from each other at the same time.

'I'm fine. It's just a scratch,' he said, his face angled away from her. He moved back and covered the wound with his hand. Akane simply nodded and also stepped back herself. The patterns on the floor mat seemed to have become suddenly interesting to her as she stared at it.

Heisuke and Shinpachi stood gawking at the pair in front of them before finally staring at each other in confusion.

'Hey. Mind telling us what happened here? Shinpachi asked.

'Yeah. Akane, who is that man?' Heisuke chimed in.

'Uhâ€| '

Before she can answer, she heard Souji clear his throat.

'We better not discuss that now. Nagakura-san, Heisuke, we better go out there and help out,' he made a motion to move towards the door. The other two captains exchanged another bewildered look before finally following him.

Akane was just about to follow them when he spoke again.

'You stay here. Don't go out until someone fetches you,' he said, his head inclined just a little towards her. It seemed like he was intentionally trying not to lay his eyes on her.

'Butâ€" '

'That was our vice-captain's orders. Heisuke, watch over her.'

Akane wasn't even able to utter another word when he turned his back

on her again. As she watched him disappear in the corner, she found herself silently asking a question which seemed to have been popping more and more frequently in her mind lately.

\_What is going on here?\_

\* \* \*

><p>It was a typical morning at the headquarters of the Shinsengumi. The captains were currently on the dining room enjoying their breakfast. Their faces showed not a single trace of the eventful night that happened barely 12 hours ago. The group successfully busted the secret meeting of the <em>Kageno senshi Tachi <em>with the help of some members from the Aizu clan who arrived sooner than they expected. They successfully surprised the rebels and managed to catch a handful of them including a few high-ranking leaders. In addition to that, they did not also suffer from much casualties except for a few injured men. To cap it all off, not even a single bottle of ochimizu was found on the site last night so they didn't have to worry about explaining the medicine to those who were oblivious of it.

All in all, everything went better than planned and the success of the last mission settled happily on the dining bunch. Everyone seemed happy and normal.

Well, all except for two people who were sitting side by side looking particularly awkward and uncomfortable.

Akane suffered from another tense walk back to the headquarters last night. The captains decided to let the junior members of their squad leave first and took responsibility of wrapping things up. Since she was still dressed as a maiko and did not have any change of clothes with her, she was ordered to go back with them instead. On their way back, she decided to stay at the tail of the group with Heisuke and Harada flanking her sides. She barely heard, let alone understood a word from the conversation of the two as they discussed the night's happenings. There were already so many things going on in her mind already. She kept her head bowed low, blocking everything and anyone. She can't let anyone from the city recognize her, after all.

She internally berated herself at the thought.

\_Who are you kidding? You know you just can't afford looking at  
\_\_\*\*him\*\*\_\_.\_

Akane tried peeking from underneath her lashes inconspicuously. There at the head of the group together with Sannan and Hijikata was Okita. She briefly took note of the tensed angle of his shoulders before keeping her head low again as her system was assaulted with another chain of blushing fiasco.

When they got home, she immediately dashed to the restroom, washed as quickly as she could and slipped back to her normal kimono and hakama ensemble. She was not surprised at all when she heard a knock on her door and heard Gen-san's voice asking her to go to the meeting room for a while. She felt herself dragging her feet as she made her way to the captains' private area. She was tired to the bones and her body felt achy all over after the long hours she spent wearing the uncomfortable maiko attire. Above all that, she was craving for a

peaceful time in her room alone. There are things she needed to mull over after all.

Before knocking, she sighed and pushed back all the thoughts swirling inside her head. She heard Hijikata's voice call out from beyond and she entered as silently as she could. Her eyes flitted over those inside.

All the captains were there.

Except for him.

She felt her heart leap. Whether, from relief or disappointment, she did not even dare to know.

'I want to know everything,' her gaze was pulled by the vice-captain's voice. He looked tired but determined.

She nodded. His seriousness seemed to have rubbed on to her as she retold everything she heard from the plan of attack against the shogunate, the ochimizu, the places where the medicine have already been distributed, and the group's benefactor and elixir's developer.

'Kazama Ayato. We'll have to do a background check on him,' Sannan said from beside Hijikata.

Her gaze wandered around the group again. Everyone looked so tired and a little ruffled. Her gaze was immediately pulled back to the person sitting at the head of the room again when she heard him speak.

'Souji said that the man threatened to take you away.'

Akane tried to keep the sudden tightening of her insides from showing in her face as she stared at the vice-commander.

'Yes, he did.'

'Do you know why?'

She stopped.

She dropped her eyes momentarily to the floor. Akane decided that it was already probably time to talk to them about Ayato and his claim about her blood helping in the development of the new breed rasetsus he was creating. Just as she was about to open her mouth, however, she stopped when she heard a female voice whisper a single word inside her head.

Don't.

She felt her eyes go round in surprise. Ever since she arrived in this time, she hasn't heard anything from the internal voices that used to plague her while she was still in her world. Not even a single word nor a sigh. Until now.

She decided to trust it on impulse.

Akane raised her head and looked at the man sitting across from

her.

'No. No, I don't.'

She felt the hair on the back of her neck slightly stand up as she locked eyes with Hijikata's sharp amethyst ones. He seemed to be studying her. She did not dare avert her eyes from him though despite of her discomfort. Finally, he spoke up.

'Well, if that's all, I want to say thank you to you. The information you've gathered is valuable. We've captured some of the generals. Unfortunately, the one you've served tonight seemed to be the only one who knows most about the inner workings of the group and he managed to escape.'

She bowed.

'It's my pleasure to help,' she murmured.

'We better all go to bed now. We have to be up early tomorrow,' Sannan said. The others grunted as they stood up from their places and went for the door. She smiled at Heisuke and Shinpachi who yawned their congratulations to her for doing a good job before they went out. Saitou nodded to her. She thought he looked a little proud. Akane silently answered his acknowledgement by bowing her head slightly. Just as she was about to go outside, she felt a hand rest on the top of her head. She looked up to see Harada smiling down at her.

'Good job,' he winked and grinned before finally making his way out. She smiled after him and followed him out of the door.

'Akane-san,' she stopped mid-step and looked back at Hijikata.

'Yes, vice-commander?' she felt a nervous fluttering in her stomach. He just stared at her for a couple of seconds and it took all of her remaining energy to stop herself from squirming under his gaze.

'If there is something you want to tell me, my office is always open,' he finally said.

That took her by surprise. She just nodded at him.

'Run along then, it's late.'

'Y-Yes captain. Goodnight,' and with that, she half-ran, half-walked towards her room.

\* \* \*

><p>Akane was brought back to the present at the sound of her half-empty soup bowl clattering to the floor. She was so lost in her thoughts that she accidentally knocked it off her tray. The bowl bounced and rolled towards the person beside her, the remaining drops inside it spilling into the boy's hakama. She froze.</p>

Shinpachi looked up at the sound, grinned, and nudged Heisuke beside him. The young captain stared at him then at the two people sitting across from them before his face also split into a smile. He elbowed Harada on his other side and motioned to the pair on the other side

of the room with his head.

'This is going to be good,' Shinpachi murmured. Heisuke snickered and Harada cocked his eyebrow playfully. Then they all eagerly leaned a little forward in unison, waiting for the blow.

Okita and Akane have become some kind of an entertainment to them every morning. It never failed to amuse them how the first division captain seemed to have an endless flow of teasing material to say to the girl who, in turn, never failed to retaliate at him harshly. The arguments of the pair, which, as it seemed, were at their worst during breakfast almost always made their day.

'I bet ten yen that Akane will finally hit Souji with her tray today,' Heisuke whispered.

'Twenty yen to her stabbing him with her chopsticks. In the eyes,' Shinpachi added.

The three snickered.

The pair in front of them, however, remained immobile. The only sign that said they haven't completely petrified themselves to death yet were the blinking green and brown eyes that were currently staring at the bowl between them.

It was Akane who snapped out of it first.

'Oh, I'm sorry. I'm sorry,' she said in a rush. She suddenly looked around in panic, looking for something she can use to wipe the spilled soup off the left leg of Souji's hakama. She was so out of sorts that she missed seeing him also snap out of his daze at the sound of her voice.

'No, it's okay. I've got it,' he also said in a hurry. He immediately grabbed the napkin on his tray and wiped the wet spot on his leg.

'I'm really sorry.'

'It's fine.'

'I'll just take thatâ€"'

'Here's yourâ€"'

The two both talked and reached for the bowl at the same time, causing their hands to touch. They froze again.

Akane felt her eyes go wide as she felt his skin touch hers. She looked at him with her mouth slightly open and felt her cheeks suddenly flood with warmth. Her blush, unfortunately, worsened even more when she saw a pink tint also graze over the boy's cheeks. They let go of the bowl the same time that they looked away from each other, causing it to clatter noisily again to the floor.

She withdrew her hands and placed it firmly over her lap, her fingers tangling over each other. Beside her, she heard Souji awkwardly clear his throat after a few seconds.

'Here.'

She looked sideways to see him holding out the bowl, his eyes staring at the tray in front of him. She took it, also keeping her eyes trained anywhere but him.

'Arigatou!' she murmured.

Souji gave a quick sound of acknowledgement and made an obvious and pointed effort of picking up his chopsticks again and continuing his meal. Akane followed suit afterwards, their cheeks still slightly stained with pink.

Shinpachi knit his brows together and gaped openly at the two. Heisuke's mouth fell open. Harada only raised both his eyebrows at the scene that just occurred.

'What just happened?' Shinpachi whispered at the two beside him. Heisuke just shook his head, speechless. Harada, on the other hand, just picked up his bowl again.

'I have no idea,' he said, his lips slightly curling into a smile as he continued eating.

\* \* \*

><p>'It looks rotten. Yes. it's rotten. Let's move to the other shop.'<p>

Saitou followed Souji towards the next stall and patiently watched as his friend picked another radish from a bucket of vegetables in front of the shop. His blue eyes followed the other's hand as he twirled the radish between his fingers. Suddenly, Souji dunked the vegetable back to the bucket.

'It's also rotten. Let's try the next one,' Souji grumpily said.

Saitou sighed exasperatedly and waited for a moment before walking towards the direction the other man went to. Ever since they left the headquarters, he noticed the grumpy, brooding air surrounding the usually laidback and playful captain. Not being a talker himself, he just let the other boy continue with his sulking. When they finally reached the market, however, the latter's mood seemed to have become even worse as he resorted to verbally attacking every piece of vegetable, fish, and chicken he laid eyes on.

The third division captain now approached his companion with an exasperated look on his face.

'Souji.'

Souji looked up from the carrot he was holding.

'What?'

'What is going on?'

His brows knitted together and he tore his gaze away from his friend.

'I don't know what you're talking about,' he grumbled. He was just about to throw the carrot back to its container when Saitou snatched it away from him and pointedly gave it to the vendor.

'We'll be taking this please, plus ten more of it,' he said. 'Please also wrap a dozen of this and half a dozen of that,' he pointed towards two other varieties of vegetables before turning back to his friend.

'You've been glaring and growling at things ever since we left. Don't tell me you don't know what I'm talking about.'

Souji moved his head away from him and placed his hands on his hips. After a moment, he sighed.

'I actually don't know what's happening myself. That is the problem.'

'Did something happen?' Saitou reached for the goods they bought and paid the vendor. They continued walking the narrow strip of road between the market stalls.

'A lot has happened.'

The two fell silent for a moment. Saitou looked sideways at the boy beside him who was still looking glum and frustrated about something. It was his turn to sigh next.

'Mind if you tell me?'

Souji stopped in front of a stall and started piling fish on top of the other all of the sudden. His forehead was creased as if he was thinking hard about something. Then he pushed the fish towards the vendor without a word and wiped his hand on the towel hanging on the stall post.

'Have you ever felt lost? Like you don't have any idea of what is happening around you and what to do about it. And just when you finally thought you had the slightest idea of what's going on and decided to finally act on it, you just end up realizing that you were even more confused than ever. Ever felt that before?' Souji asked. Beside him, Saitou blinked a couple of times, trying to process what he said.

'No,' the long-haired captain finally said after a moment.

He gave a bark of frustrated laughter, took the package from the vendor, and paid for it.

'See? Now don't blame me if I'm not the warmest person right now.'

They fell into a comfortable silence again. The pair turned into an alley and walked towards the shortcut that will lead them back home.

'Do you think it's bad?'

Souji looked sideways at Saitou who was staring ahead with his usual

poker face.

'What is bad?'

'What you're feeling right now. You think it's affecting you in a bad way?'

He looked ahead again and tried processing the question. The sun was going down in the horizon. They needed to reach home soon. Dinner will be in less than two hours and they still need to give the ingredients they bought to Harada and Akane who are in charge of cooking today.

He felt his brows knit together once more when her name ran over his mind.

\_Akane.\_

'No. I don't think it's bad,' he finally answered. 'But I think it's changing me.'

Souji felt his friend's eyes on him. He laughed a little.

'You know changes are not exactly my favorite, right?' he saw Saitou nod a little from his peripheral vision. He rested his eyes on a sakura branch beyond him swaying in the wind.

'I don't feel like myself lately. I've also been doing and feeling things I was sure I wouldn't have done or felt before,' he suddenly stopped as he realized the silliness of his words. Souji scratched the back of his head agitatedly and laughed.

'It's strange right?'

'Hm,' Saito merely answered. He softly snickered at his friend's reaction.

'If that is some kind of sickness, I hope I don't catch it from you,' the third division captain suddenly said. 'It sounds painful.'

It was his turn to silently nod his head.

\_You have no idea. \_

'About Akane.'

He started with the sound of the name and turned his head so suddenly towards the man walking beside him, he thought he have suffered a whiplash.

'What about her?'

'She was also acting strange lately. I think the man from the other night really scared her.'

Souji suddenly felt something dark and heavy bubble up from inside him as he remembered that day.

\_You'll never know when you'll lose her. \_

'Oh yeah, I just remembered. I still have to kill him,' he growled. Saitou suddenly looked at him at the sound of his voice. He knew he must have looked thunderous but he didn't care. Luckily, the other man decided not to comment on it and just looked away.

'I have to train her more. It'll help her a lot in case that happens again.'

\_It will never happen again. I won't let it. \_

'Did something happen between you and her that night?'

He nearly tripped on a protruding stone on the road at the question.

'W-what do you mean?' Souji sputtered, looking wildly at Saitou who was merely staring at him calmly.

The third division captain shrugged casually after a while and continued looking ahead.

'You were both acting so differently so I just thought maybe she also caught whatever illness you have. Maybe you passed it onto her.'

He merely gaped. He didn't have any answer to that statement.

'Anyway, whatever it is, I hope you get both cured soon. She's looking really uncomfortable lately.'

That made him stop for a moment.

'Uncomfortable?'

'Yes. She's getting really affected by it, I think. You weren't yourselves this morning.'

Souji looked guiltily at the ground. Has he been really making her uncomfortable? It's not like he wanted it. He didn't even know what was happening himself. He reviewed his interactions with her ever since that night when he said that embarrassing statement and internally shook himself as he remembered it.

\_Because no one is allowed to touch what's mine.\_

He didn't have any inkling of an idea as to why he said that or how he even came up with that ridiculous idea. It just seemed to have popped out of nowhere and felt right for him to say during that time.

\_Was she feeling uneasy because of that?\_

Thoughts ran and ran around his head until finally, he couldn't follow them himself. From beyond, their headquarters loomed against the setting sun behind it. He sighed.

'What's happening to me?' he asked himself quietly.

It was supposed to be a rhetorical question. But being the perpetually sharp person Saitou is, he was only mildly surprised that

the third division captain heard him.

'We don't know yet. But whatever it is, it is making you more human.'

He didn't know whether it was just him or he really heard a hint of a smile in the other boy's voice when he said that.

\* \* \*

><p>'Tadaima!'</p>

Akane looked up from her position in the porch stairs to see Saitou and Okita walking towards them with shopping baskets strapped on their shoulders. She was currently sitting with Harada, Heisuke, and Shinpachi who were keeping her entertained with stories of their past drinking sessions and other debaucheries again. Lately, the porch steps near her room seemed to have become their favorite meeting place every time they needed to take a break or just wanted to relax. Despite of it being her once peaceful and personal spot, Akane didn't mind the change of things at all. After quite a long time, she suddenly felt again the same feeling that she had when Suzume and Rika entered her life.

Like sunlight piercing through her darkness.

Yes, she felt cold and lost when she first arrived at this world but lately, she's starting to feel strong bursts of light slowly slicing through that dark haze.

One of the most brilliant rays, however, is something that she did not quite understand or was familiar of. It had been messing around with her head and emotions lately and caused her to experience emotional fluctuations that still remained alien to her. The light was strong and bright, magnetic, and warm. It was something that felt strangely good and fearsome at the same time.

She felt a pair of eyes watching her and Akane's gaze immediately and unwittingly zoned to the man who seemed to be taking his time advancing towards their group. Beside her, she heard Harada call out 'You're late,' at the two.

'Sorry, we had a hard time choosing the ingredients,' Okita said, his eyes locked on her. She continued staring at him in return. Somehow, she did not feel embarrassed or conscious as she matched his steady gaze with her own. His eyes seemed to be trying to tell her something and something inside her urged her to know it.

Saitou and Okita finally reached the foot of the steps. Souji removed the basket from his back and slowly put it down on the ground, his eyes never leaving hers. Finally, his lips started to turn upwards until it finally curled into its familiar grin.

Akane was not surprised at all at what he said next.

'Hey, kitten,' he called out teasingly.

She creased her brows in the usual way she did whenever she gets annoyed at him. Her heart, however, felt light as if a burden was suddenly lifted from it.

'What?' she asked, letting a trace of irritation and exasperation show in her tone. Souji's smile widened.

'You'll definitely like our menu for tonight,' he said, his eyes twinkling.

'I don't want to know,' Akane struggled from letting a full-blown relieved smile show on her lips.

'Ask me, come on.'

'No.'

'Please?'

'No.'

'Come on, don't be a killjoy.'

She sighed to indulge him. 'Fine. What is it?'

Something glinted on his eyes.

'Fish. The favorite of your kind,' he said, the warm expression on his green eyes contrasting the playful smirk on his lips.

'You baka,' Akane called out to him, causing him to laugh.

Souji looked at the girl in front of her. She looked convincingly annoyed at him but there was something on the set of her lips and the sparkle of her eyes that warmed something inside him. The warmth started from the tips of his toes, climbed upwards to the ends of his fingers until it reached his chest. He noted how the heat was particularly concentrated more on the place where his heart was. He smiled at her as a thought ran across his mind.

\_Let's stop being uncomfortable with each other, okay? I missed teasing you.\_

Akane's eyes crinkled in the corners as if she understood his silent words. For the first time ever since she arrived at the Shinsengumi headquarters, she felt her lips form the most honest and grateful smile she can offer.

\_Yes, let's. I've missed it too. \_

#### 14. Chapter 14: Romance and Tragedy

A/N: Seems like someone has finally finished writing her plot summaries!

\* \* \*

><p>Fast, uneven footsteps were heard from the corridor leading to the assembly room of the headquarters. The captains have just finished their regular conference and were just idly waiting for the dinner call time when the door of the room was forcibly opened with a bang. Everyone looked up from their conversation and saw Akane

standing at the threshold, panting and red-faced. Some tendrils of her hair have come undone and she was looking at the floor with both a serious and bewildered look.<p>

'Akane? Is something wrong?' Heisuke, who was closest to the door asked. Akane continued staring with a dazed expression on her face. After a full half-minute, she finally sat on the floor with her head bowed.

'Hey, are you sick? You look flushed,' Shinpachi peered at the girl's face concernedly. When she did not answer, he hesitantly poked her on the arm.

'Akane? Woohoo...'

The girl slowly moved her head up and then down.

'Yesâ€|you're okayâ€|?'

Her head then changed directions midway and started turning side by side.

'Noâ€|?'

All of a sudden, she looked up and stared at the wall ahead. Heisuke and Shinpachi both jumped a little on their seats. Akane looked to her left and gazed at Heisuke. Then, out of nowhere, her lips curled into a mischievous smile and she gave a soft giggle.

Souji watched the little scene in front of him, his eyebrows raised in curiosity. She seemed to be acting strange tonight. His eyes followed her as she slowly moved forward and leaned towards the eighth unit captain who has slightly leaned back on his seat. The others were also looking at her silently as if afraid of making any noise that can snap her out of her daze.

'Umâ€|Akane,' Heisuke muttered, feeling a little uneasy now. The girl's smile merely widened. There was some emotion playing on her eyes that he can't identify.

'Heisuke-kunâ€|' she murmured breathily.

'Y-Yes?'

Akane fluttered her eyes and sighed.

'I like you.'

Everything went still for a few seconds.

'W-WHAT? !'

\* \* \*

><p>8 hours earlier:<p>

Akane wiped the sweat off her forehead with her sleeve and sighed. She felt a little hot after sweeping the expansive yard of the headquarters for almost three hours straight. It is late spring and she got fascinated by the rich colors of the yard so she volunteered

to help tidy it up after her morning practice with Saitou. It has taken her the whole morning to do the task and would have gladly worked more if not for Shinpachi calling her for lunch already.

She returned the broom to the small cupboard behind the kitchen and proceeded to the well beside it to wash her hands. Then she dusted her hakama and started walking towards the dining area. She was just a few steps away from the turn of the corridor when she heard Heisuke shouting. His voice sounded strained and a little more high-pitched than usual. She started sprinting to see what was happening. When she finally turned the hallway, she saw him, Shinpachi, and Okita standing just outside the door of the dining room. Shinpachi was scratching the back of his head awkwardly, Okita looked amused, and Heisuke seemed to be just an inch from dying from fright. She knew that expression. There was only one person who can do that to him.

Could it be!

Before she can even finish thinking of her name, a girl's head poked from inside the room. The young woman's eyes rounded in glee and she let a small squeal escape her lips. A moment later, she was flying towards her.

'Akane! Akane! Akane!'

Akane nearly fell back as the girl glomped her. She felt her arms circle her neck and her body being rocked as the brunette started jumping up and down excitedly.

'S-Sakura, what are you doing here?' she gasped her words out, placed her hands on the other girl's shoulders and slightly pushed her back. She regarded her at an arm's length a little cautiously.

'I visited you! It's been a while since I last saw you!' she said. Then her eyes suddenly roamed her surroundings. 'This place is so beautiful! Who would have thought that some old men are living here?' she gushed, her hazel brown eyes sparkling brightly.

'Hey, who are you calling old?' Shinpachi called out from behind. Sakura ignored him and took hold of Akane's shoulders. Then she looked at her up and down.

'You're still wearing these clothes? But you're beautiful as a maiko! I don't understand why they have to force you to disguise as a boy! They are so mean, not even allowing you to wear a proper yukata,' the girl pouted a little. 'Can't they afford to buy one?'

Souji gave a short amused laugh at her words.

'Wow, this girl is so rude it's almost unbelievable,' he said, grinning.

Akane's attention was suddenly pulled to the door of the dining room when she heard an angry voice call out Heisuke's name from inside it. The poor boy almost jumped a foot and looked at someone inside helplessly.

'I told you Hijikata-san, I did not invite her!'

'You take care of this! Our lunch is already chaotic enough with you and Shinpachi here!'

Heisuke moaned and looked at the two girls in front of him.

'Hey, Sakura! Go home! Please go home!' he moaned pitifully.

Sakura slowly turned her head towards him, a deadly, almost manic smile on her lips.

'I came here to visit you and Akane. What's so wrong about that?'

The eighth division captain ruffled his hair with both hands and gave a frustrated growl. Then he looked at Akane who nearly drew back at the helpless look on his eyes.

'Akane, pleaseâ€|I want to eat lunch todayâ€|' he moaned. He even clasped both his hands in front of him for added drama.

'Ahâ€|uhmâ€|Sakura, maybe we can just meet later?' she stuttered. Her words died in her throat though when she saw the other girl's face fall.

'I'm disturbing you, aren't I? I'm sorry, I guess I should just wait for you to come by the restaurant again. I'm just feeling a little down lately and you're the only friend I haveâ€|' she looked at the floor, her hyper mood extinguished in an instant. Akane thought she even saw tears briefly shine in her eyes.

Akane inwardly groaned and berated herself guiltily. Her eyes moved from the brown pair of eyes that look so downcast and the blue ones which were staring at her helplessly. Finally, she sighed.

'How about I come with you and we can eat lunch together?'

Sakura's face lit up in a span of half a second. She grasped her hands together and resumed jumping up and down again.

'That would be fantastic! Let's eat at our restaurant! My mother is serving her special ramen today. We'll have a girl to girl talk! I'm so excited!'

Akane nodded fervently then looked at the three men who were still standing outside the door of the dining room. She raised her eyebrows to silently ask for permission. Shinpachi nodded a little too enthusiastically and Okita made a playful, shooing motion with his hand. Heisuke's shoulders slumped in relief and mouthed thank you to her.

Sakura turned her head back to the men in the hallway.

'I'll take her out for a while, okay? She'll be home by dinner time!' she started pulling Akane down the steps. From the hall, they heard Souji call out.

'Bring her back in one piece!'

Sakura only grinned at him. She tugged harder, eliciting a small yelp

of panic and surprise from the other girl. Then they were out of the gates and on to the road leading them to town.

\* \* \*

><p>Sakura carefully put down the tray of sake bottles on the floor. Akane smiled at her before looking around her once more. They have just finished eating their late afternoon snack and were currently in Sakura's room. The girl had sweet talked her way to her parents about letting them have a few drinks after their meal. Akane, of course, tried to decline the offer but Sakura simply waved her off saying that their first ever get together deserves a celebration. She finally conceded after seeing the brunette look so happy bustling around and arranging things for her.<p>

Just like that day when she helped her with her maiko attire, Akane felt awkward talking to Sakure at first because of her hyperactive moods. She immediately warmed up to her though and in no time, they were laughing together like old friends. She's just the type who can affect even the glummest of people with her sunny disposition.

'Here, you get the first drink,' the girl offered her a cup which she took a little reluctantly. Akane closed her eyes as she drank and felt the liquid warm up her throat. Sakura clapped her hands and poured herself her share. She coughed a little after drinking and made a face. The two girls looked at each other then giggled in unison.

'I'm really happy that you're here, Akane. We just moved to Kyoto a couple of months ago and I didn't have the time to go out and mingle until recently so I don't know a lot of people around here. You're the closest to a friend I have so sorry if I'm always popping around randomly,' Sakura looked at her sheepishly before turning her attention back to the drinks in front of her.

She felt herself smile. A warm, happy feeling spread in her chest as she watched the girl happily bustling around.

'No problem. I'm happy I've met you too. It's hard disguising as a boy after all. At least with you, I can be myself,' she answered. Lately, everything seems to be going well for her. If not for the support of the people around her, she would have already descended to hysteria with the continuing problem with Rika and Suzume. Everyone is treating her better than what she originally expected and they more than helped in making things easier for her.

'So, who among the captains is your lover anyway?'

Akane was suddenly and forcibly yanked away from her solemn internalization and she sputtered and choked in her cup.

'W-what?' she gasped at Sakura and wiped the drops from her face that she accidentally let out in such an unladylike manner.

The girl merely looked at her with a knowing look on her face that made her extremely uncomfortable. Her mouth quirked on the corners and Akane felt herself blush furiously.

'You're surrounded by strong, ruggedly handsome men who wield swords

24 hours a day. Don't tell me not one of them has caught your eye,' Sakura leaned towards her and wriggled her index finger at her face. Akane leaned back . She felt her face burning.

'I don't know what you're talking about,' she stuttered.

'Come on, Akane. I want to know. That's partly the reason why I kidnapped you today. They may not be that popular in a good way around here and I may be new in town but I'm pretty much aware of their effect on some of the women in town. I mean, those looks! You can look at them and not feel hungry and thirsty for a day. They look THAT delicious to the eyes!'

Akane fidgeted on her seat and drummed her fingers awkwardly against her cup.

'Well, I guess, they're good looking,' she mumbled.

'So. Can you tell me some things about them? Like who has the best body or who looks best after waking up? Hey, have you seen any of them give bedroom eyes?'

'Sakura!' Akane groaned at her, completely scandalized.

The girl sighed and went back to her seat.

'You're so innocent,' she shook her head hopelessly. Then suddenly, she smiled again. 'Is it Shinpachi? You like him don't you?' she asked coyly.

Akane shook her head fervently. 'No!'

Sakura's face fell then squinted her eyes at her as if trying to figure her out. She suddenly clapped her hands excitedly.

'I know! Let's play a game!'

'G-game?' Akane looked at the girl in front of her warily. Somehow, she felt as if any game concocted by her can be life threatening.

'Okay, okay, we'll do it like this. I will mention a name and you will tell me what you think of the person okay? You can answer in one word if you want but you are not allowed to pass! After every name, we will drink!'

'That sounds dangerous, Sakura,' Akane eyed the bottles of sake between them cautiously.

'Oh, come on, Akane-chan, please? It will be fun!'

'But why am I the only one who should answer?'

'You can ask me questions next! It's your turn first.'

Akane looked at the eager face in front of her and sighed after a while. Who can deny someone with that kind of expression? She looked so eager and excited it seemed like a mortal sin to say no to her.

'Fine, fine.'

Sakura gave a girly squeal and poured some sake in both their cups.

'Ready to start?'

Akane nodded weakly. The brunette grinned at her and heaved a deep breath. She braced herself.

'Shinpachi.'

'Brother,' she answered and the two girls both drank at the same time. Sakura immediately filled their cups again.

'Vice-captain Hijikata.'

'Capable.'

'Captain Kondou.'

'Father,' she said with a small smile on her face.

'Saitou.'

'Role model and guide.'

'Heisuke.'

Akane looked up before answering and saw Sakura with a nervous look on her face. The anxious look in her eyes suddenly made her realize one of the reasons why her friend wanted to know so much about what she thinks of the men. She smiled at her knowingly.

'Friend,' she said. Sakura's shoulders relaxed in relief and she smiled at her shyly.

'Okay, how about the guy they call Sannan?'

'Clever.'

'Harada.'

'Best friend.'

'Okita.'

Akane opened her mouth then immediately closed it again after realizing that she doesn't have any answer to say at all. She knitted her brows. Is he a friend? With all the teasing and fighting they are doing, she knew without a doubt that their relationship doesn't fall in the category of normal friendship. Are they enemies? Not really. He had shown her kindness countless of times already and even saved her one time.

\_So what are they?\_

Akane felt suddenly aware of the eyes of the girl in front of her boring into her face. She was suddenly shook from her reverie when

she noticed Sakura's lips quirk in that strange, knowing smile of hers again.

'Uhâ€|confusing,' she finally muttered and drank. For the first time that night, she relished the warm flow of the alcohol as it warmed her body. It somehow took her mind a little off her obvious blushing.

'What?' Sakura's smile merely widened at her answer.

'Confusing. He's confusing.'

'Is he a confusing person or you feel confused about him?' the girl pressed on. Her eyes were shining with something she couldn't quite place.

'Huh?' Akane blinked up at her. She tried reaching for the closest jug of sake near her but her sudden movement made her vision spin. She realized how dizzy she was already.

'Is he a confusing person or do you feel confused about him?' Sakura repeated patiently.

'Oh. Um. Both.'

She didn't know what's wrong with her answer but it made the other girl in front of her smile wider than she had ever done that day.

'I see,' Sakura leaned back after pouring sake in both their cups. Akane's vision were starting to slowly blur in the edges but Sakura's knowing look still clearly registered to her. She looked like someone who just discovered something big and grand. Her head felt light and she felt suddenly carefree. Her friend nodded her head eagerly at her, egging her to continue.

Akane sighed. There is no way she'll let her out of this, won't she?

'He confuses me. Sometimes he' teasing me so bad and there are other moments when he's so kind and gentle. It's really strange,' she threw back her head and drank the sake at one go. 'There was even this moment when he said I belong to him,' she decided to add. She knew the alcohol was making her more talkative and open than usual but in that moment, she just didn't care.

It took Sakura everything not to jump on her seat right then and there. She knew that any sudden movement can make her friend conscious of what she's doing and break her talkative mood.

'Really? He said that? And what was your reaction?' she asked, barely able to keep the excitement in her voice.

She watched as Akane inclined her head a little on the side as if contemplating something.

'I don't know. I got confused. I always get confused with him. I start with one emotion but always end up confused afterwards.'

'Hmâ€|I see. You didn't feel angry at all at what he said?'

Akane shook her head.

'How did you feel about what he said then?' Sakura asked softly, a small smile playing on her lips.

Akane looked down at her cup as if contemplating. Then she smiled. Her eyes looked gentle despite of the obvious haze in them.

'Safe. I felt safe.'

\* \* \*

><p>'Heisuke-kun. I like you.'<p>

Heisuke scrambled back towards the far wall, his face bright red, as Akane continued to slowly approach him. Around him, the other captains were also dumbstruck and have been rendered immobile in their positions. The boy squeaked in fear as he felt the wall hit his back and gaped at the girl still slowly crawling towards him.

'Shinpatsu-san!' he called weakly at the man across from him. Shinpachi, however, just continued gaping at Akane as if it is his first time seeing her.

'Heisuke-kun,' his attention was brought back to the person in front of him in an instant. Heisuke could almost feel his heart on his throat as he stared at the girl who is close enough to grab him now. Her hair was messy, her cheeks were red, and her lips were parted. He gulped before forcing an answer out.

'Y-Yes, Akane-chan?'

Akane leaned his head a little to the left as if regarding a strange creature she saw for the first time. Then she suddenly smiled at the boy in front of him.

'Please take care of me tonight,' she whispered before reaching out for him.

Before she can touch him though, a hand held her back using the collar of her kimono. Akane looked back and saw a thunderous looking yet smiling Okita holding her. She frowned at him. In front of her, she heard Heisuke make a strange choking sound before collapsing into a coughing fit. Then in a flash, she felt a strong pair of arms go around her back and the back of her knees and her body being lifted off the ground. She squinted her eyes and looked at the face of the man hovering above her. She tried asking what was going on but her tongue seemed to have lost its coordination with her brain and all that came out of her was a jumble of slurred words.

'You're drunk. You have to go and sleep before you do or say something more that you will regret tomorrow,' Okita gave her a sweet smile that reminded her of something venomous.

Akane blankly noted the shoji doors of the room opening and the familiar walls of the corridor passing by. After a while, she saw another set of shoji doors opening and felt her body being lowered to the ground. She sighed as she felt her body sink on something

soft.

'What do you think you're doing? Getting drunk like this. I sure hope Sakura helped you go home tonight or I'll kill her,' he heard Okita growl somewhere beside her.

'Why are you angry?'

'What?'

'What are you angry?'

'Because you're acting like a silly child,' he glared at her. 'If you know you can't handle your alcohol well, then don't over drink and make a commotion. Leave that to the guys,' he said to her heatedly. Seeing her like this made him uncomfortable and irritated especially with the scene she made in the dining room. Akane, however, merely looked at him in confusion. After a while, she yawned.

Souji's anger and worry immediately evaporated at the sight. She looked so small and fragile and innocent. Akane moved to her side, facing him, and placed her hands under her cheek looking ready to sleep.

'You're not Heisuke!' he heard her mutter softly, her words still slurred. His smile faded.

'I'm not. Do you really want me to go get him?' he asked in a low voice.

Akane seemed to think about it for a while. Then she reached out for his hand and cuddled it to her face like a pillow. She smiled.

'It's okay. You're warm anyway,' she said softly, sighed again, then smiled at him. After a while, her eyelids fluttered shut.

Souji felt rooted on the spot as the feeling of her warm cheek registered against the palm of his hand. Her breathing has become long and deep and it tickled his skin. She's probably very drunk to be able to fall asleep this fast, he thought. He found himself smiling down at her peaceful face after a while.

'Good. Because I can already take care of you well enough,' he murmured.

\* \* \*

><p>'Akane? Akane. Look at me child.'</p>

Akane opened her eyes and looked around. She doesn't have any idea where she is or what she's doing. Everywhere around her is dark except for the bright circle of light that she's standing on. She knew she should feel afraid but her emotions seemed to be travelling slowly in her body at the moment.

Where am I? What is this place? Am I dreaming?

She whipped around when she heard a musical sigh from beyond the darkness.

'Yes. You're dreaming.'

'Who are you?' she called out.

In front of her, a dot of light suddenly appeared in the dark where the floor should have been. It became larger and larger until it finally reached the same size of the spotlight she was standing on. Akane squinted at it. Thin, flimsy wisps of light started swirling on the area above it, like barely visible gusts of wind whirling together at the start of a hurricane. The wisps swirled and reeled, swirled and reeled until it coagulated into a big mass. Akane watched in awe as the shape lengthened and widened until it finally took solid form. The form pulsed brighter and brighter until the light was too much for her and she had no choice but to close her eyes and shield them with her arm.

'Open your eyes, child.'

Akane started at the soft voice and raised her head up in surprise. She has heard that voice somewhere before. She wasn't able to mull over it enough, however, with the sight that welcomed her eyes. There, in front of her, also standing in a spotlight, was the most beautiful woman she had ever seen. Her hair was white, reaching her ankles and pooling off gracefully around her bare feet. She was wearing a white kimono as dazzling as the rays of sun that seemed to pulse under her gaze as if it was alive. What really took her attention, however, is the face of the lady. She is both angel and siren. She had the pure innocence of a child and the blinding attractiveness and femininity of a grown young woman. Her eyes were like molten gold and her lips were red.

'Who are you?' Akane found herself whispering. Somehow, she felt as if she is not allowed to speak any louder in her presence. The woman in front of her smiled kindly at her.

'I'm Hanae. The Great Demon of the Light. I am she who is part of the one half that started the great race of onis. It is my blood that flows in the veins of our kind,' the woman stopped and regarded her silently for a moment. 'It is my blood that flows in you.'

Akane simply stared at her and tried to process her words. She knew she was in a dream because of the weirdness of things but somehow, she also knew that whatever she is experiencing has a hold on reality.

'Why am I here?' she asked.

The woman simply looked at her solemnly. The look in her eyes was so intense and deep Akane almost felt choked by it. It was sadness displayed in her golden orbs. Pure, unfathomable sadness.

'I hope you forgive me,' the woman finally said.

She started at her words. She wasn't expecting that.

'For what?'

Silence.

'For taking you away from your world and bringing you here.'

Akane gasped and took a step back in surprise. Her eyes went wide as she stared at the woman in front of her.

'You're the one who brought me here?'

The woman just continued gazing at her with sorrowful eyes. She tried to move forward to get closer to her but she felt her body stopped by an invisible barrier that prevented her from taking another step outside the circle of light she was standing on.

'Why? Where are my friends? Are they alive?' she shouted at her desperately.

'You're needed here, Akane.'

'Rika and Suzume! Please tell me they are still alive!' she beat her hands against the invisible barrier. Tears have started flowing from her eyes, staining her cheeks with salty streaks. She felt scared and desperate. She needed answers. She needed to know something, anything, about her friends. To her horror, the woman's form started to slowly fade away, her light slowly evaporating in the vacuum. Akane beat her hands harder against the shield and tried to shout but realized helplessly that her voice was also suddenly gone. She slowly dropped to the ground as the last wisp of light dissolved in the air. The last she heard before she woke up were the words whispered to her from beyond the darkness again and again until she resurfaced from her slumber.

'I'm sorry child. But this where your real pain starts. Be strong.'

Akane woke up with a start. She was panting and was drenched in sweat as if she ran a marathon. Her heart was beating fast and there was something streaming on the sides of her face.

Tears.

She closed her eyes to calm herself and was not surprised at all as scenes and words from her dreams flashed vividly on her mind. She knew it was real. She felt shivers slowly build up from the base of her spine and move up to the back of her neck as she remembered her words.

But this is where your real pain starts.\_

Akane stretched her arm to clutch on something to relieve the emotions that were currently racking her body when she felt something silky and soft touch the tips of her fingers. She opened her eyes and moved her head to the side. There, beside her futon is a single red rose with a roll of paper tied to its thorny stem. Akane stared at it for a while, contemplating if she was really looking at a lovely flower or just hallucinating. Finally, she pushed herself off her bed and gingerly touched her head. She had a killer headache. She reached for the flower, rolled the stem a little between her index and thumb, and untied the roll of paper.

With her sight still a little blurred from sleep and the pain in her head, it took her a while to finally read the handwriting on the paper. When the words finally registered to her, she felt her heart

stop.

\_Your friends are such beautiful ladies. Come find me if you don't want that beauty wasted. \_

Akane felt a pounding in her head that throbbed painfully in time with her beating heart. \_Rika and Suzume. They are alive. And they are with him. \_

\_They are in danger. \_

She was suddenly brought back to reality when he heard the strangled voice of a man from somewhere in the house. It took her by surprise so much that she unconsciously tightened her hold on the thorny stem of the flower. Akane felt a faint pain on her index finger as it got pricked and saw a drop of blood blossom from her skin and trickle down to the parchment. Then, the voice suddenly registered to her awareness. She knew that timbre.

She stood up in a hurry, grabbed her robe, and dashed out of her room.

When Akane reached the meeting room, everyone looked like a mess. Hijikata looked beyond angry and worried. His hands were balled into fists on his lap. Sannan looked shocked. Harada was staring at the two, pale-faced. What grabbed her full attention; however, were the three men in the middle of the room. Shinpachi and Heisuke wore similar stunned expressions and were fighting to hold down a struggling and manic looking Okita. His green eyes were flashing with so many emotions that both made her scared and worried about him. He was staring at something on the floor, his teeth gritted in fury.

Akane followed his gaze and saw an opened box near Hijikata. Beside it was what looked like a thick twig around 4 inches long. She squinted at it to steady her vision.

And felt her heart stopping for a few heartbeats for the second time that morning.

It was finger. A human finger.

Before she can even open her mouth, Heisuke spotted her and answered her silent question with a weak voice.

'Kondou-san. He has been kidnapped.'

## 15. Chapter 15: On the Edge of Insanity

A/N: Forgive me for the long and depressing chapter?

\* \* \*

><p>Akane heard a voice from behind the door and took a deep breath to steady her nerves before entering. Inside, Hijikata had his back on her, writing something on his desk. She settled herself on the floor silently and patiently waited for him to finish. Akane knew him to be a man with great reign over his emotions. As she stared at his back now, however, she noted the noticeable change of air around

him.<p>

He seemed to have shut everyone out.

And she can't blame him at all. The scenario was still also vividly plastered on her mind even as she sat on the vice-commander's office now.

When she rushed to the meeting room that morning, she wasn't expecting something as ghastly as this. Everyone was shocked but no one surpassed the states Hijikata and Souji were in. The vice-commander never said a word and sat shaking on his seat. Akane had the feeling that he was trying to keep everything in out of fear of destroying something.

It was Souji, however, that worried her. Unlike Hijikata, he did not bother keeping the distress that was raging inside him. She can still remember how he easily ripped himself off Heisuke and Shinpachi's grasps and broke the wooden box on the floor with his fist. He kneeled shaking in front of it for a moment before storming out of the room. Akane was just about to follow him when something on the floor caught her peripheral vision. She slowly turned her head, a dreadful feeling spreading in her chest. She had a hunch of what it was even before her eyes settled on it.

There, resting on the white cloth that was once in the box is a single red rose petal.

She knew right then and there who was behind everything. Dealing with her friends' entrapment was one thing but having Kondou also affected made everything even worse. Their commander had been gone for a month, meeting with some members of the Bakufu in Nara and was travelling back home last night when their group was ambushed by a pack of men. Yamazaki had reported that the three escorts that were with him were found dead in the middle of the forest road they were traversing. Their bodies were drained of blood. There was also no sign of their captain found on the site of the attack.

She fisted her hands on her hakama as dark thoughts clouded her mind. Though she hadn't spent as much time with him as with the other captains, he showed her nothing but kindness every single moment they came face to face in the headquarters. It is practically because of Kondou that she was still alive. The man was practically the closest she had for a father here.

Akane was shook from her daze when the man in front of her finally faced her.

'Yes, Akane?' he asked. Hijikata's eyes were still sharp and attentive but there were also other emotions simmering beneath them now. Fear. And anger.

She raised her chin and looked at him steadily.

'Please let me join the attack group tonight, Hijikata-san,' she said with as much confidence in her voice as she can muster. The man in front of her stared at her for a while. He seemed to have already expected her request.

'You can't. The battle will be a closehanded one and Saitou said you

are not yet good enough to fight with us.'

Akane swallowed at what he said. She knew he had a point but still, she can't let them leave her behind.

'Please. I can help you,' she looked him in the eye. 'Ayato. He wants me.'

She watched as a number of emotions played on the man's face until confusion finally settled over his features. She decided to continue before he can speak up.

'I've also received a letter from him this morning.'

Hijikata's gaze on her sharpened.

'What did it say?'

Akane stopped a little before answering. Opening up the issue about her friends may not be a good idea now. 'He said I have to go to him,' she finally said.

'Do you know the reason why he wants you?'

She nodded then stared at her hands on her lap. 'I'm sorry I didn't say it sooner...The truth is that I met him again after our first mission while I was on patrol,' she stopped and forced her heart to calm in her chest. 'He told me that he needs my blood for his rasetsus.'

'What?'

Akane stopped herself from flinching at his voice. 'He didn't say much. All he said was that my blood helped the rasetsu Sano-san and the others thought they killed the night of my first mission.'

Hijikata suddenly hit the floor forcefully with his hands and she closed her eyes at the sound. 'Why are you only telling me this now!'

'I'm sorry, Hijikata-san. I never thought it will come to this. I'm sorry,' she whispered to cover the breaking of her voice. All she wanted to do right now was to run back to her room and hide but she knew she had to fix things. She had been selfish enough. 'I know it was my fault so please, let me fix this. Let me come with you. I can help. He just wants me to go there.'

She finally forced herself to look at the man in front of her when he remained silent. Akane was shocked, however, when she saw his eyes. She expected anger in them. But right now, it held a different emotion. It almost looked like worry.

'What are you planning to do if I let you come? Go with him? If what he is saying is true, doing that may pose a much bigger problem to us.'

'But with me there you can request a swap. I can take care of myself from there. I'll make sure he won't be able to use me,' she pressed. In front of her, Hijikata was still looking at her as if he was

trying to read her emotions.

'You are a silly girl, do you know that?' he snapped at her again. 'You can die or spend the rest of your life as a prisoner. You're really willing to sacrifice everything?'

Akane looked up at his words and stared at the man in front him defiantly. 'Won't you do the same thing then, Hijikata-san? If you have the power to turn things around, won't you do it?'

The two of them stared at each other unblinkingly for a moment in silence. Finally, Hijikata sighed at the determination on the girl's eyes.

'Yes, I will do the same,' he murmured. 'Fine, I will let you come with us but,' he stopped as relief spread on Akane's face. 'you are not allowed to go with him or do anything else silly. You will just act as the diversion. If you don't agree with this, I'll have you locked up in your room tonight to make sure you won't leave the headquarters.'

Akane was taken aback at what he said but found herself nodding at him. Allowing her to go with them is already enough for her.

'Yes, Hijikata-san.'

The vice-captain nodded to her then turned his head and looked at the door with a faraway look in his eyes. 'It will destroy Kondou-san knowing that someone sacrificed her life for him,' he murmured. 'Anyway, I don't think he was kidnapped because of you in the first place.'

Her forehead creased in confusion. 'What do you mean?'

'If he really wants to get you, then why didn't he just ambush you while you are on patrol or just out in town? That will be easier for him. No, he's doing this to attack someone.'

'Someone? Who?'

Hijikata looked at her sideways.

'Souji.'

Akane's eyes widened in surprise. 'Okita-san? But why?'

'Wasn't he the one who fought him and stopped him from getting you in that ambush a couple of weeks ago? Souji thwarted his plans. Somehow I feel that this Ayato is the type of vengeful man.'

Akane stared at him, completely at a loss for words. The vice-commander noticed and looked at her.

'I want you to keep what you told me today a secret for the meantime.'

She was still confused but nodded her head anyway.

'Hai. Thank you very much.'

'Go ahead now so you can prepare. We will have a meeting later. Be at the gates at 7 for assembly. We'll leave you if you're late.'

Akane bowed at him before standing up. Just before she can close the door behind her though, she heard him call her name again.

'Akane-san.'

She looked back at him.

'Vice-commander?'

He stared at her with his sharp eyes once more. His amethyst orbs had that same look they always have whenever he talks business.

'You are not allowed to die tonight, understand? That is an order.'

\* \* \*

><p>'Are you sure this is the place?' Heisuke whispered as he stared around him. They were currently in the fringes of the woods in front of an abandoned building that seemed to be rotting right in front of their very eyes. The captains including Akane and Gen-san were the only members of the attack group tonight. With the threat of rassetsus in the building, they have no choice but to finish this on their own. Everyone knew it was suicide but still, not a single trace of fear can be seen from the faces now staring at the building ahead.</p>

Everyone was willing to do whatever it takes to save their commander.

Sannan consulted the piece of paper that was included in the box sent to them that morning which bore an image of a crudely drawn map.

'Yes. This is it,' he confirmed.

'Why this bastard decided to target us like this and then invite us to his lair, I am yet to know,' Shinpachi grumbled from his position behind a wide barked tree. Akane, who was beside him, stared at the house ahead. The roof seemed to be ready to collapse anytime and half of the building looked burned and charred. The structure did not even seem to be strong enough to be used as a secret headquarters. Suddenly, a flash of light a few yards away from her right caught her vision and she automatically moved her head towards it. Standing behind an oak is Okita. The flash came from the blade of his sword as he fiddled with it, his thumb slightly raising it from its sheath then releasing it to let it slide again into its case. His stance was relaxed but his eyes showed something else. She felt the hairs at the back of her neck stand on end as she stared at him. He looked ready to kill.

'He'll snap out of it,' she heard Harada whisper beside her. Akane looked at him with an embarrassed look on her face. He must have caught her staring.

'I hope,' she whispered. The red-haired captain studied her for a

moment.

'Why are you even here in the first place, Akane? It's dangerous. I don't know what entered Hijikata's mind but this is crazy,' he asked in a quiet voice. His eyes were disapproving as they studied her closely.

Akane dropped her gaze from him and stared again at the building ahead. That was not the first critical look she received that day. She can swear that almost every pair of eyes held the similar expression when they talked about their strategy in the meeting room that afternoon. Even something flickered on Okita's dull eyes as he heard the news. Since it was Hijikata who gave the order, however, nobody decided to question it.

'Vice-captain orders,' she simply answered in a meek voice. She can still feel Harada's eyes on her. Then finally, he sighed and also looked ahead.

A soft rustling suddenly came from the shadows of the trees on their side. After a moment, Gen-san and Saitou emerged from behind a clump of trees.

'There are no guards surrounding the perimeter. The place is deserted,' Saitou announced.

'So they are not planning to defend their fort at all. It seemed like they are really waiting for us to do the first move,' Sannan grimly muttered.

They all trained their eyes at Hijikata who was still staring ahead with an impassive look on his face. The vice-commander placed his hand on the hilt of his sword after a moment.

'Let's go.'

\* \* \*

><p>Akane winced as the floorboard creaked under her foot as she placed her weight on it. The state of the building was even worse on the inside. Cobwebs hung everywhere and the air was heavy with the smell of rotting wood and moulds. The structure was majorly composed of a great hall so wide and high it reminded her of a school gymnasium.</p>

She tightened her grip on her sword and looked around. Since they don't have any idea about the exact number of their opponents, they decided to work and move as one group tonight. On the head of their cluster were Hijikata, Okita, and Saitou. She, Shinpachi, and Heisuke composed the middle while Harada, Sannan, and Gen-san brought the rear. Except for a few squirrel-sized rats, they haven't seen anything else moving ever since they entered. Akane gulped and squinted at the darkness surrounding them. She silently reviewed in her mind the things Hijikata told her that afternoon after their meeting. She just had to stick with them all throughout the night and try her best not to get captured. He supposed Ayato will try to get a hold of her by using his rasetsus so he placed her in the middle of the group to prevent that from happening as much as possible. If they're successful, Ayato will have no other choice but to come get her himself. Then it will be easier for them to take him down and

find Kondou.

Akane roamed her eyes around the building, taking note of all the possible entrances and exits. A second floor balcony above ran the four sides of the structure, overlooking the hall where they are now treading slowly. Everything looked so still.

\_ They must be here. They should be here. Rika and Suzume and Kondou-san. They are somewhere here.\_

All of a sudden, a blood-curdling voice which sounded like a cross between a laugh and a shout split the silence. All of them whipped around and looked for the source of the sound.

There, balancing on the banister above them is a man with white hair and red eyes. He leered down at them like a gargoyle looking down at a group of prey he can't wait to eat. Then, out of nowhere, another one appeared, then another, and another, until almost the whole length of the balcony seemed to be lined with them, their red eyes glowing in the dark.

'Shit, there are about 40 of them here,' Heisuke muttered through gritted teeth as he turned in a slow circle while looking up.

'Heh. Piece of cake. We just have to put a little more effort than usual, right?' Akane heard Shinpachi give a short laugh from her other side as he readied his sword. His voice sounded the same as usual but she noticed the note of worry lacing his tone. Around them, the others have started readying their weapons too, waiting for the attack.

It all happened in a less than a few seconds. A rat from above the ceiling scampered and accidentally knocked a loose piece of wood. The thin plank fell 20 feet from the air and hit the floor with a resounding clatter that echoed in the room. Akane watched in horror as the rasetsu directly above her widened his eyes at the sound. The man gritted his teeth at the resounding echoes until finally, he couldn't take it anymore. He gave a shout, almost like a growl of an animal, then jumped off the ledge directly towards them.

In a moment, all the other rasetsus also jumped from their positions like birds nimbly taking flight off their branches. She gasped as they dropped around them one after the other, seemingly unharmed by the impact of the fall. There was a second of stillness as the men hit the floor and straightened up a little from their crouches. Then, they finally launched themselves towards their group like rabid animals.

Fight immediately broke afterwards. She briefly heard Hijikata shouting something then Heisuke and Shinpachi cursing in unison before lunging themselves off their positions. The closest man swung his sword at Shinpachi who dashed forward to receive the attack and another rasetsu jumped at Heisuke who met him halfway with his sword. Everything was happening so fast to the point that Akane can only focus on the fight of the two captains closest to her. All she knew was that their enemies seemed to be more like animals than men with the way they were snarling and attacking. They weren't even using swords. They were just lunging at them, their teeth bared, their claw-like hands slashing the air viciously as they struck.

Akane tightened her grip on her weapon and immediately moulded her body into the attack stance Saitou taught her. This is it, she thought, she's finally in a real battle. Sure enough, a man was already upon her immediately, his mouth foaming with saliva. Akane swung her sword at him and managed to swipe him in the arm. Blood started gushing from the wound and she gritted her teeth, suppressing the instinct to shiver at the sight of the first ever wound she instigated on another being. The man, however, did not seem affected at all. He fell back, laughing, as he looked at her with manic red eyes. She glared at him in anger. Then she swung again, this time, targeting his neck. The rasetsu, however, managed to hold her sword off with one hand and tried twisting it away from her grasp. Akane gasped as she saw him tighten his grip on the blade and draw blood from his own hand when she refused to let go. Then the next thing she knew, she was flying, her back hitting the hard floor afterwards as the man lifted her through her sword.

She heard herself give a soft sound of 'oof' as the air was suddenly knocked out of her after her fall. She immediately reached for her sword which clattered on the ground beside her and held it in front of her as she waited for the next blow. She felt her eyes widening in surprise, however, as the man suddenly changed direction, jumped over her, and moved to target Shinpachi instead who had just finished off the one he was fighting. Akane looked at the scene in shock. It's as if the rasetsu just put her down to get her out of the way. She pushed herself off the floor and looked around. Sure enough, the other men were heading towards the other captains, passing her as if she was not there. It was then that it finally sank in.

They are avoiding me. —

She felt herself paralyzed for a couple of seconds. When she volunteered to come tonight, she already readied herself to fight and maybe even have her first kill. She expected herself to struggle and get hurt. Not to be spared and avoided while the others fought to the death.

And this feeling, what was happening around her...It was a whole lot worse than what she prepared herself for.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, a dark, heavy emotion started bubbling from within her. Anger coursed through her veins as she watched the other monsters lunge at her friends. Akane stood up, her eyes flashing in fury, and bounded towards the man nearest her who was just about to lunge at an unknowing Shinpachi. Her blade ran over the rasetsu's right shoulder down to his left side, causing the man to cry in pain. In that moment, she didn't care at all about whether she'll have blood permanently staining her hands. All she cared now was to fight and help.

She saw a movement on her right and blocked the new rasetsu heading towards Heisuke by driving the hilt of her sword on the man's stomach. The move sent the monster reeling backwards. On her peripheral vision, she saw Shinpachi finally take down the monster she just slashed earlier. She was just about to give the final blow to her current opponent when suddenly; Heisuke blocked her way with his body and took care of the man with his own sword. Then he looked back at her.

'Akane! You try to injure them as much as possible to slow them down

then Shinpachi and I will take care of the work afterwards!' he shouted over his shoulder. Akane stopped for a moment and looked at the boy in front of him. Then she swallowed before finally nodding.

'Yes!'

With new orders, she spent all her energy trying to hit anyone Heisuke and Shinpachi cannot manage to handle at first. The rasetsus were rabid, stronger, and faster than them but they were so far gone that they did not have enough logic to know how to attack properly. Akane ducked and attacked, hitting some with the hilt of her sword, slashing others if they seem too wild to be taken care of by the two men near her. She just watched another one fall to the ground when suddenly, she heard a shout come from the center of the room. Her gaze immediately locked on the vision of the man in the middle of the hall.

'Where is Kondou-san!' Okita shouted at the rasetsu he was pinning down on the floor with his foot. His kimono was drenched with blood and his hands were red. He had his sword deep in the man's chest and he glared at him with a mad look in his eyes. The monster coughed blood and stared up at him blankly. Then, ever so slowly, the rasetsu's head moved sideways as he looked towards the dark area in the room ahead. Okita followed his gaze and looked at the space beyond for a second or two. Then he twisted his sword by the hilt, causing the rasetsu below him to finally give one last cough before closing his eyes. Akane watched as he pulled his weapon from the body, causing more droplets of red to fly to his already blood splattered face, before dashing off to the place beyond them.

Hijikata whipped around as he saw the younger captain rush past him.

'Souji! Don't!' the vice-commander shouted after the boy as he buried his sword into his opponent's chest. He pulled his blade and was just about to run after him when another rasetsu blocked his way again.

'Souji!'

Akane looked around in panic. Everyone was busy with their own battles. Then her eyes suddenly caught Hijikata's amethyst ones. She was clearly able to read the answer to her silent question there.

Yes. Go.\_

She broke into a run.

'Akane! Wait!' Harada tried to grab her as she ran past him but lost his grip on her forearm as a rasetsu held the end of his spear and tried shaking it from his grasp. She did not break speed and continued dashing forward.

'They won't hurt me!' she shouted back at him over her shoulder briefly. She ran and ran until finally, the sounds of the battle centralized in the middle of the room faded as she continued hurtling towards the direction she saw Okita disappear to. She is now running

in a very narrow corridor lined with rows of rooms on each side. Some were lacking doors while others were boarded up with heavy planks of wood.

'Okita-san!' she called at the top of her lungs. She knew it was silly but hopelessness was slowly starting to eat her up from the inside even as her chest and sides screamed at the effort of her run.

'Okita! Okita-san!'

She can now see the end of the corridor beyond her. There was a single door at the end of it with light streaming from its bottom crack. Akane did not dare miss a second as she kicked the door open and charged inside.

The first thing that registered to her when she barged in was the sight of Kondou gagged, bound, and unconscious at the back of the room. Then her eyes immediately flitted to the other side just in time to see Okita staggering backwards and falling to the floor after making a ghastly choking and gurgling sound. Akane watched in horror as she realized what was happening. Blood was gushing like the steady flow of a stream from the wound on his side. Everything seemed to go in slow motion for her as she watched his body hit the wood with a sickening sound. Then time finally stopped as she looked at his motionless form on the ground. Akane found herself walking towards the man in front of her slowly, her eyes wide with horror. She felt a painful lump on her throat.

He did not seem to be breathing.

\_No. Noâ€|. NO.\_

'Oâ€|Okita-sanâ€|?' she whispered as she finally reached his body. She kneeled and reached out her hand towards him slowly. Before she can touch him, however, a voice stopped her.

'I told you. A lowly human like you is no match for me. You might have held your own the first time we met but there is no chance you'll win over me with your vision clouded that much by anger,' Akane flinched at the sound of the condescending voice from the shadows. Then she slowly looked up from the body on the floor and stared horrified at the man who stepped out into candlelight.

'As for you, my lady, I'm happy you came,' Ayato sneered at her.

\* \* \*

><p>Akane drew her sword at him in a flash. Her hands were shaking but she gripped its hilt as if her life depended on it.<p>

'What have you doneâ€|' she whispered hoarsely at him. Ayato merely smirked at her.

'I killed him.'

She felt the blood in her veins freeze.

'As I will kill your beloved commander here if you refused to come with me,' he continued. He took a step towards her, the point of her

blade almost touching his chest now. She only needed to push a little to sink it into his flesh.

'I won't let you touch him and my friends,' she gasped out, her voice now also noticeably shaking. Ayato reached out and caught a tendril of her hair that had fallen on her face and caressed it between his thumb and index finger. Akane pushed her sword ever so slightly, her eyes flashing dangerously at him.

'Don't touch me,' she hissed. The man only smiled at her, his eyes glinting with amusement.

'You know you can't kill me. You can't kill anyone yet. That's why you allowed your two idiot friends to do the dirty job for you earlier, right? You could have helped them more if you took care of some of the rasesetsus on your own but no; you were too precious for them and they were so stupidly chivalrous so they did all the killing for you,' he stopped and grinned widely at her. 'And you, my little lady, just let them.'

Akane almost choked at his words. She felt pain shot through her as he realized the truth behind them.

'Why are you doing this?' she asked hoarsely. Ayato started moving towards her a few more steps, letting the sword dig more into his skin.

'This?' he is now closer than ever and she stared in horror as blood oozed out from his wound. About an inch of her sword now is already embedded in his flesh. Still, he continued moving forward. 'Because it's fun,' he murmured, his red eyes staring fixedly at the tendril of hair between his fingers.

'Why did you have to take Kondou-san too?' she asked in barely a whisper. Ayato's grin now turned to a full-blown smirk. He laughed then stepped away from her, the sword making a squelching sound as it was pulled away from his body. Akane saw the wound on his chest heal in an instant.

'Why, you ask? Because of him,' he motioned towards a still motionless Okita behind her. 'You know, I'm not the type of person who easily forgives. I needed to show him how a mere human like him can't be up to par with someone like me. Or us. It was like hitting two birds with one stone, you see. I get to have you here and torture him at the same time.'

She immediately flared again at that statement.

'You crazy bastard!'

Ayato threw back his head and laughed again.

'He was foolish enough to interrupt. I have eyes and ears everywhere, my lady. I know things and use them to attack people where it hurts the most. He's just paying for the consequences.'

That was the last straw. Akane sent herself flying towards him with an angry cry, her sword glinting in the candlelight. Ayato, however, simply avoided her attack in his usual graceful swift moves. That did not stop her, however, from trying to hit any part of him. He merely

chuckled at her in mild amusement. Seething in anger, she ducked her upper body a little, held the hilt of her weapon with both hands, then drove the blade again towards the man in front of him. Just before he can move, however, she changed directions and followed the swerving of his body. Akane heard the cold sound of her sword slicing the air and watched as the blade slightly grazed Ayato's arm, cutting his sleeve in the process. She saw his eyes widen a little in surprise as he stepped back. Then, his features turned impassive before he swiftly hit her wrist with his hand and sent her katana flying, clutched her arm, and twisted it behind her as he spun her around.

'Let's end this little game, shall we?' he whispered lowly at her ear from behind her. 'It's time I claim what's mine. Just go with me and I'll take care of you. You don't need to get hurt.'

'No!' she hissed at him and tried freeing herself from his grasp.

He chuckled darkly.

'You don't want me to get angry, Akane.'

'Let go of Kondou-san and my friends!' she tried to ignore the goosebumps that broke in her skin at the feeling of his breath against her ear.

'Oh. That,' he stopped as if he just suddenly remembered a very trivial matter. 'Your friends? I forgot to tell you that they're not with me.'

Akane's eyes went wide in disbelief and her body froze.

'W-what?'

'I knew you've been roaming around town asking about two girls. I tried looking for them at first because I knew they can be valuable assets but there was no sign of anyone that fit your descriptions,' he shrugged casually. 'Ah, and also that finger in the box? One of my men had this stupid idea of putting the finger of the man he just attacked inside it without my permission while he was heading towards your headquarters. I can see it was effective though with the state that boy was in when he entered this room so maybe I'll do it again in the future,' he said with humour on his voice.

Akane unfroze from her stance and growled at him in frustration before saying a string of curse words that made the man holding her softly laugh in delight.

'My, my, your language little girl. '

'You decided to include an innocent man in this mess and turned a group of individuals to monsters! What kind of person are you!' she screeched. She tried hitting his foot with her heel and drove her free elbow at his stomach but he just easily evaded her blows.

'I didn't turn those men into furies against their will. They wanted power and I just gave it to them. Being turned into nothing more than mere animals was a price they were willing to pay,' he stopped as if he just remembered something. 'Now that you mention it, I'm sure your

friends have probably become their dinner by now.'

Akane was just about to retaliate again when all of a sudden she heard footsteps echoing from the corridor beyond and someone shouting her and Okita's name. She felt her chest loosen up a little at the same time that Ayato slightly stiffened behind her.

'You don't know them. They won't be easily put down by your failed experiments,' she muttered at him, relief tainting her voice.

She felt the arms holding her loosen a little then flinched as she felt hot breath on her cheek again. 'I commend your faith on them, Akane. But I suggest you don't invest on those men too much. As I told you before, I know how to hurt people the most,' he stopped then pressed her lips closer to her ear. 'For all you know, you may be putting them in even more danger with what you're doing.'

Akane felt her heart stop for a few heartbeats at what he said then collapsed on the floor as Ayato suddenly released her.

'I'll be taking him with me again for now. I'm not yet through with this game,' her eyes went wide as he wrapped an arm around Kondou's shoulder and smiled at her. 'If you don't want anybody else getting hurt, come with me. You know where to find me.'

All of a sudden, a gust of wind suddenly attacked the windowless room and she was forced to close her eyes. When she opened them again, only dust motes remained shifting in the space where the two was just a couple of seconds ago.

She continued staring at the spot in front of her hopelessly even as she heard the door of the room open with a bang and Harada calling out her name. She was briefly aware of other voices that have also started shouting around her. She felt empty and drained. It's as if she just realized that her life had fallen apart a long time ago and she just noticed it now. Rika and Suzumeâ€|Kondou-sanâ€|and now Okitaâ€|they are all hurt.

Waitâ€|

\_Okita.\_

Akane suddenly spun around and came face to face with a concerned looking Harada who suddenly grasped her shoulders. Sudden desperation enveloped her body once more and she started shouting at him.

'Okita-san! Okita-san, he's hurt!' she tried going pass him to look at the boy who was collapsed on the floor. Harada, however, merely tightened his hold on her, his body blocking the sight beyond.

'Don't. Don't look.'

She suddenly stopped.

'Noâ€|No. He's not yetâ€|'she asked with a trembling voice, her eyes wide with horror.

The man holding her looked at her for a moment with somber eyes

before finally speaking.

'No. Not yet. But he might need a miracle to survive.'

## 16. Chapter 16: Sacrifices

A/N: So I can't stay put without adding another chapter for the day.  
Note: This is not the full 16th Chapter. I decided to post it anyway though because i think it was too long already and I feel like your brains will already bleed if i try to squeeze everything in this one. The continuation will be up tomorrow. (or if i get 50 views by tomorrow :P)

\* \* \*

><p>'I need clean towels and hot water!'<p>

'Hai!'

'Please rush to get the aspirin!'

'Did you call for the doctor already?!!'

Yamazaki briefly stopped in the middle of his run to look back at Hijikata for a second.

'Yes, Sir. He is on his way,' the young man shouted then rushed to the room at the end of the corridor.

Akane kept at pace with the others as they ran towards the direction the medic went to. Her legs were still aching and crusts of blood were already drying on her cheek and neck. She was unaware of all of this, however, as all of her senses were currently focused on the man inside the room that she and the other captains were crowding in now.

Inside, Okita lay motionless, his face as white as paper. The dark red stains on his clothes contrasted sharply against the starkness of the bed. Akane watched as Yamazaki untied the sash holding his robe and opened his kimono to reveal the wound underneath. She felt her throat constrict at the sight. The right side of his stomach was covered with dark red. Some of the blood had dried already but she can still see fresh waves of it flowing from the inch-wide opening on the skin. It looked deep.

'Will he survive?' Saitou asked the one question that all of them have been afraid to voice out from his position at the door. Yamazaki briefly looked at him then at the other men around him before returning his attention to the wound he was now cleaning.

'I cannot say. Right now, I can only administer first aid. He has lost a lot of blood already and he had already developed a fever,' he briskly said. A junior officer suddenly barged in the room then carrying fresh white towels and another bowl of hot water. Yamazaki grasped some of the cloth even before the man was able to put them on the floor and held it against Okita's wound with pressure.

'Do whatever you can to help him for now,' Hijikata said, his voice carrying a different pitch than his usual. He looked white. Akane

suddenly had the urge to cover his eyes to stop himself from seeing the sight in front of him.

\_First was Kondou-san. Now, it's Okita. \_

He's basically watching his family fall apart right in front of him.

Her gaze snapped back at the scene in the middle of the room as Yamazaki reached for a vial containing a clear liquid. He removed the cork stopper with his teeth and briefly raised the cloth he was holding against the other man's skin to pour the liquid into the wound. Okita's face suddenly contorted a little in pain at the contact of the solution with his injury.

'He's still responding. That's a good sign. Please hand me the medicine,' the medic said. Harada quickly reached for a pack and threw one at him. The young man quickly opened it and tipped the package back on Okita's mouth. He then raised Souji's head and poured some water between his slightly parted lips.

The group all looked around then at the sound of footsteps in the corridor. Akane felt her eyes widen in shock as she recognized the man standing now in front of them holding a lantern and a big suitcase.

'Kodou-san. Thank you for rushing. Please, the patient is here,' Sannan stepped forward and motioned him towards the room. Akane followed the man with her eyes as he walked passed her. Before he finally entered, she caught his gaze. She saw him knit his brows for just a moment before he finally concentrated his attention on the situation in front of him.

The group watched him check for Okita's temperature, pulse, and wound briefly. After a while, he turned towards them.

'Please leave us for now. I'll request Yamazaki to help assist me tonight. I'll be calling for you as soon as I'm finished.'

The men around her all gave half-hearted grunts before hesitantly turning around to leave the room. Akane remained a little longer on her spot though, her eyes never leaving the man lying on the floor. She only decided to move when she felt a hand on her shoulder. She looked up and saw Harada also looking at the boy inside.

'It will be alright. Take a rest for now. You need it.'

She nodded at him before looking back at the room. Yamazaki gave her a small bow before slowly closing the shoji doors. Akane kept her eyes trained at Okita who was now partially covered by Kodou. One word echoed silently on her mind before the doors finally closed in front of her.

\_Live.\_

\* \* \*

><p>She shifted restlessly on her futon and stared at the ceiling ahead. The light of the moon was bright tonight and it cast longer and leaner shadows on her room. From beyond the yard, she can hear

the singing of the cicadas and the lone nightingale that always visits this time every night. Akane closed her eyes and let herself drown on the sound. She sighed after a while, however, when she realized that it was not helping her at all. Even the nocturnal hymns and songs outside that usually put her to sleep were not enough to calm her mind right now.<p>

It was the second night ever since their attack on the headquarters of the Kageno Senshi Tachi. Akane and the others spent the whole of last night waiting for news about Okita only to end up even more troubled at what the doctor told them around dawn. She can still remember herself running as fast as she can in the hallway last night after one of their men tapped on her door and announced about doctor finally emerging from Okita's room. When she ripped open the shoji of the meeting room, Kodou had just settled himself on the floor.

Everyone was there. They also seemed to have not been able to sleep a wink either.

Hijikata stared at the man in front of him with unreadable eyes. He waited for the doctor to take a sip of the tea offered by Gen-san to him before finally speaking up.

'How is he?'

Kodou placed his cup back to the floor then looked at the people around him with a grave expression on his face.

'He lost a lot of blood and is suffering from a fever right now. He was lucky enough that the sword missed his kidney by barely an inch,' the room went suddenly still at his statement. Everyone seemed to have held their breaths. 'Still, I cannot promise you anything. If he gets by the next day, then that means there is more chance. Everything depends on his will to live now.'

The people inside the room still remained motionless. Akane felt her chest constrict as an unknown emotion suddenly crept on her, gaining speed and power by the second. It became heavier and larger and thicker until finally, the crest of its wave snapped. She slowly withdrew herself from the opening of the door and leaned on the wall beside it for support. Hidden from the eyes of the captains inside the room, she put both hands on her mouth to silence the choking cry that she freed from her throat.

Akane now sighed as she lay wide awake on her bed for the second night in a row. Thankfully, Okita's fever broke around afternoon yesterday. However, he still spent most of his time drifting in and out of consciousness according to Yamazaki who, at the doctor's orders, was the only one allowed to tend to him at the moment.

As for her, she would be lying now if she said that she did not spend the whole day trying to stop herself from going to his room to see him.

Akane groaned as she now rolled on her bed. Her eyes felt sore from lack of proper sleep and her muscles were still painful from what happened the day before yesterday. Her mind was also not on its best state either. In the end, she still wasn't able to free Kondou. Worse, her friends' current states still also remained a problem.

There was nothing she accomplished. And everything was still a mess.

Finally tired of her discomfort, she gave a soft frustrated growl and forcefully pushed herself up from her futon. Then she rested her head on her hands and slightly pressed her palms against her eyes. She bit her lip and tried steadying her nerves for a second. After a while, she finally looked up with a determined look on her face. Then she stood up, slid on her robe, opened her door, and strode to the night beyond.

\* \* \*

><p>'Akane-san?' Yamazaki blinked a couple of times at the sight of the girl in front of her. She was looking up at him with a mixture of guilt, nervousness, and fear on her eyes which greatly contrasted her stubborn stance. She cleared her throat, opened her mouth, then closed it again uncertainly.</p>

'Can I help you?' the young man asked as he stepped out into the corridor and silently closed the door behind him.

Akane swallowed the lump blocking her throat. Yamazaki was looking down at her with a curious, almost concerned look on his face. She dug her fingernails on her palms and steeled herself for what she was about to say.

'Yamazaki-san, please let me see Okita-san tonight,' she blurted out, her words tumbling one after the other as she bowed at the boy in front of him.

In front of her, Yamazaki slightly gaped at her in shock. There was so much desperation on her voice that nearly took the young man off guard. He knit his brows at the girl who still had her upper body bowed low in front of him.

'I'm sorry butâ€"'

'Please?'

'Akane-san, please stand upâ€"'

'Even for just a couple of minutes? I justâ€|I just have to see him.'

Yamazaki looked at the young woman in front of him guiltily. He may be a firm believer and follower of orders but he is not stone-hearted especially when it comes to females. Finally he sighed.

'Look at me, Akane-san.'

Akane slowly straightened from her crouch and peered at the boy in front of her uncertainly. Her heart dropped at the look on his face.

'I'm sorry, but the doctor told me not to expose him to too much stimuli at this critical time,' he said which caused her to cast her eyes to the floor sadly. She wasn't mistaken when she thought it would be a challenge to change his mind.

'But,' Yamazaki spoke again, this time with a voice softer than his usual. She immediately looked at him hopefully again.

'But, I need to freshen myself up for a while so I need someone else to watch over him for the meantime. This room is stuffy after all.'

Akane's eyes lit up and her lips broke into a smile. Yamazaki gave her a small smile of his own before stepping away from the door.

'Thank you so much, Yamazaki-san,' she bowed to him again.

The young man only nodded at her before turning his back and walking away. She looked at the door, heaved a deep breath, and slowly opened the screens.

The first thing that registered on her when she saw the man inside was how peaceful he looked. Akane padded to the room as quietly as possible, not wanting to wake him up. Then she knelt beside him.

A little color had already returned to Okita's face ever since she last saw him. His upper body was covered in bandages and his forehead glistened with a light sheen of sweat. His lips looked pale and his cheeks seemed to have shrunk a little. Akane released the breath she wasn't even aware of holding. At least he did not look in pain now, she thought. She picked up a clean towel beside his pillow and moved towards him to wipe off the perspiration on his brow when suddenly, his eyelids fluttered open.

Her hand was still stretched in mid-air as she looked down at the green eyes which were staring up at her groggily.

'Aâ€|kane?'

She immediately put down her hand in panic.

'O-Okita-san, you're awake. Wait, let me call Yamazaki. Just stay there,' she turned and was just about to stand up when she felt his hand weakly circle her wrist. She looked back at him with a mixture of surprise and embarrassment.

'Noâ€|stay here,' he whispered and closed his eyes.

Akane settled back on her seat slowly. 'Are you okay? Do you want anything?' she asked with a soft voice. He seemed so frail and weak. Okita closed his eyes again and only shook his head at her slowly.

'Justâ€|stay.'

She felt immediately grateful that his eyes were closed as she felt heat slightly graze her cheeks. His hand remained around her wrist.

'How are you feeling?' she asked him again after a few moments of silence. He turned his head towards her direction, his eyes still closed.

'Hurt,' he said so softly, she was sure she wouldn't have caught it

if she was not concentrating so much on him. She found herself moving her hand away from his, only to hold it on her own.

'It will go away,' she said as if talking to a child. Okita, however, only knit his eyebrows together as if he was in pain.

'Is he still alive?'

Akane felt her breath stop for a moment at his question. Suddenly, she understood the real pain he was referring to. She tightened her hold on his hand.

'Yesâ€|he's still aliveâ€|' she said in a whisper.

'Were you able toâ€|save him?' he asked again.

She stopped and swallowed. She felt pressure building up behind her eyes and she blinked them before answering.

'Noâ€|We weren't able to get him,' she almost winced as she said the words. Below her, she saw Okita's jaw clench as he gritted his teeth.

'I'm uselessâ€|aren't I?' he finally said, a small, bitter smile on his lips.

'Please don't say that, Okita-sanâ€|'

'But I really amâ€|I promised Kondou-san that I will help himâ€|but I wasn't able to do it.'

'You were against a monster. It was not your fault,' Akane said, her voice a little louder now. She felt frustrated seeing him like this. Okita seemed to notice and opened his eyes a little.

'Monster or not, it was my fault that I was not strong enough to defeat him, Akane.'

She stopped and stared at him. It was very rare for him to call her by her name. Her mind struggled but failed in finding something to answer him. Souji turned his head away from her and stared at the ceiling ahead.

'Kondou-sanâ€|and this groupâ€|they are the only purposes that I know in life. You may not be able to understand it now, but thisâ€|this is my family. It is the only family that I will ever have. And I failed in protecting it,' he said with a voice that made her throat painfully close up. She felt his hold on her tighten a little and she squeezed his hand automatically in response.

'I have to do something,' he whispered before closing his eyes and groaning in pain. Akane leaned towards him in worry and peered at his face.

'Okita-san, please rest. You have to recover fully first,' she said, grabbed the towel on her side again and dabbed it on his forehead. Souji opened his eyes and squinted at the girl hovering above her in pain as he felt the stitches on his side burn once more.

'Akane.'

She stopped moving and looked at him.

'Why are you here?'

Akane stared at him, not knowing how to answer. After a while, she put her hand down and diverted her eyes from him.

'I also don't knowâ€| I only felt like seeing you tonight,' she murmured a little shyly. He gave a weak laugh at the embarrassed expression on her face. Akane felt herself blush. When she peeked at him again, his eyes were already closed once more. She just stared at him, wondering at how clearly his face showed the physical and emotional pain he was feeling despite of his lips being quirked into a slight grin. Suddenly, she felt very aware of the emotions that were rolling over her as she looked at his features.

She wanted to protect him. Wanted to stop his pain. Wanted to see him smile again at her and tease her until she felt like tearing at her hair in frustration. She wanted to see his old self come back.

'Okita-san?' she whispered after a while. Souji remained still, his eyes still closed. He looked as if he had already drained the last of the energy that he was able to recover in the past days.

'Hm?'

'You will do whatever it takes to help the people you believe inâ€| right?'

'Yesâ€|'

She stopped.

'You will do anythingâ€|?'

He nodded his head.

'Just one last question thenâ€|'

'What is it?'

Akane gripped his hand tighter than ever, her eyes never leaving his face.

'Do you trust me?'

Souji moved his head towards the direction of her voice. He wanted to look at her but his lids felt too heavy with exhaustion. Sleep was already calling out to him. Before he finally slipped into unconsciousness once more, he pushed himself to answer her question.

'Yesâ€| I do now.'

Akane stayed still for a moment until she saw the young man relax. His chest started heaving again with long, slow breaths as he finally descended to sleep once more.

'Thank you!' she whispered and put down the hand she was holding gently at his side. Akane watched as tears fell on her hands. Then she stood up, opened the door, and went out of the room as silently as she came in.

She knew what she had to do.

\* \* \*

><p>Soft, light footfalls echoed in the night as a lone figure clad in a robe walked in the middle of the deserted street. The person stopped in front of an oak tree which stood like a sentinel beside an old sake shop. After looking at the shadows furtively, the figure finally stepped out of the road and walked towards the darkness beyond.</p>

Ayato turned around as he heard a soft rustling sound behind him. He couldn't help but grin at the sight of the small form swatted by a heavy cloak just a couple of feet away from him. He leaned on the bark of the tree and regarded the person curiously.

'You actually came.'

Akane pulled off the hood of her cloak and stared at the man in front of her unwaveringly.

'Where is Kondou-san?' she asked, her voice stable and strong. She was not afraid now. She knew she's doing the right thing and it lend her the strength she needed to face the consequences of her decision.

From beyond the darkness, three figures suddenly emerged and stood just behind Ayato. Akane stopped herself from rushing forward as she saw an insensible Kondou being held by two white-haired men.

'How do I make sure you will really give him back?' she asked, eyeing the two men holding her commander. They both leered at her. They still looked mentally stable to her though so she tried to squash down the feelings of trepidation that suddenly crowded her mind.

Ayato smirked at her, pushed himself off the tree, and slowly walked towards her. He noticed that she didn't step back even though he stopped a mere arm's length from her.

'You won't. You just have to trust me,' the man smiled, his eyes glinting maliciously. Akane gave a short, dry laugh at his words.

'You won't be able to trick me again. Not unless you want your blood bank die in front you,' she suddenly removed her cloak with one hand and let it fall to the ground. Ayato's smile bled out of his face as he drank in the sight. She was pointing a short, but lethal looking dagger to her heart. The blade glinted ominously in the moonlight.

The two stared at each other for a moment. After almost a whole minute, the demon looked back at the two men behind him.

'Deliver him to the Shinsengumi.'

Akane's hold on the dagger loosened a little but she didn't dare put it down. She watched with sharp eyes as the two rasesetsus walked past her, dragging Kondou between them. When they finally disappeared in the main road, she returned her gaze again at the man in front of her.

'You need to give me proof that he was able to safely arrive at the headquarters by sunrise. Don't dare trick me. Even without my dagger, I can take myself down. I came prepared tonight,' she said.

'As you wish, my lady,' he smiled and even slightly bowed in a mocking effort to indulge her. He was really enjoying this. He reached out his hand to her then.

'Now, if you may? We have things to do at our new home.'

Akane looked at him then at the dagger she was still pointing at her chest. Very slowly, she lowered her hand. She started walking towards the man in front of her, determination printed on her features. Ayato lowered his hand as she closed the distance between them.

'Another thing,' she muttered, her eyes hard as she stared at the darkness ahead.

'Yes?' Ayato looked at her sideways. His voice and eyes clearly showed his amusement.

'I get to keep the knife.'

\* \* \*

><p>Souji groaned in protest at the sound of shouting and clattering from outside. He gingerly reached for the blanket that was covering half of his body and was just about to pull it over his head when the door to his room suddenly opened with a bang. He groaned even louder as bright sunlight suddenly assaulted his still closed eyelids.<p>

'Souji!'

He opened his eyes in shock at the voice.

'Kondou-san?' he pushed himself up in surprise only to wince at the sudden jolt of pain that throbbed on his side. The man at the door immediately ran to him and pushed him back to the bed.

'Don't move! Toshi said you've been injured and have been out for days. Just stay there,' Kondou said to him briskly, his eyes shining with worry. There were dark circles under his eyes and he looked gaunt.

'Howâ€|How comeâ€|You're here...' Souji gasped out as he waited for the pain to subside again. He heard footsteps from the hallway which were immediately followed by a gasping Shinpachi and Harada. Heisuke was close behind them.

'Ah! Kondou-san! He really is here!' Shinpachi shouted towards the corridor. In a moment, Saitou, Sannan, and Hijikata also

appeared.

'Kondou-san, you shouldn't have barged out of your room like that. Yamazaki was still tending to your wounds,' Hijikata said as he stepped into the room. His voice was stern but his eyes looked lighter than they had been in the past few days.

'I'm okay, no need to worry,' he looked back again at the boy lying in front of him. 'But you Souji, your state looked serious. Are you okay?'

'I'm better,' he muttered, still shocked even as he stared at Kondou in front of him now. Relief started spreading in his chest in an instant. His body still hurt but he felt as if a huge part of the weight he had been struggling with for the past few days was suddenly lifted from his bones.

'How did you escape?'

Everyone in the room looked at their commander then. Kondou's face darkened a little as he relived the ghastly experience in his head.

'I also don't have any idea. All I know is that I've been held prisoner in a dingy dungeon for days. I think I was drugged because I've been drifting on and off every now and then. I never saw my captor. Finally, last night, two men who looked like rascists fetched me from my cell and forced me to drink another vial of their concoction. I kept the liquid on the side of my mouth and was able to secretly spit it out as they were hauling me out the door. Unfortunately, even the remaining taste of the solution was already strong enough to make me dizzy. I passed out just as they were pulling me out of the gates. The next thing I know, I was waking up on our yard.'

Silence invaded the room for a while as everyone tried to silently figure out what happened. Finally, Shinpachi broke the tension.

'Eh, why do we still have to worry ourselves about what really happened? What's important is that you're back now Kondou-san! Hey, Heisuke, call Akane! She'd be glad to see the commander for sure!' the short-haired captain lunged at the boy beside him and started pushing him away.

Everyone unfroze at his words and started muttering their approval.

'Hey! We have to celebrate okay?! Wait, I'll just go get Akane and Gen-san!' Heisuke happily exclaimed and turned on his heel. He barely made it a few steps when Harada suddenly poked his head from around the door and called back at him.

'Ah, brat! I think Akane is not in her room. I stopped there earlier on my way here to wake her up. Her door was slightly opened and she was not there. Try the training room instead! And go get some bottles of sake while you're at it!'

From inside the room, Souji froze at what he heard. He pushed himself up again, this time slowly. From the door, Hijikata also looked up sharply.

The light feeling in his chest was vanishing as quickly as it came.

'She's not in her room?' he called out. Harada looked back at him.

'Ah, yes. Maybe she's practicing? From what I saw, her sword is not on its holder.'

Souji's heartbeat stopped. Then his eyes met Hijikata's across the room. There was a moment of brief silence as both their eyes locked.

Then the vice-captain was shouting orders at the same time that he jumped from his bed.

'Look for her! NOW!'

#### 17. Chapter 16b: Choices

A/N: Okay, I know I said I was going to post it yesterday so sorry if I only put this up now. It was very hard for me to finish this. Thank you to the new reviewers especially to the guests and anons and of course to the regular ones. Forgive me if there are any grammatical errors in this chapter, okay? It's 3am here after all. Enjoy. :)

\* \* \*

><p>The steady drip of water was the only thing that disturbed the stillness of the room. Rows and rows of vials and glass tubes ran the wall on the far left while stacks of books and parchments occupied the space on the right. On the middle were two long tables with surfaces covered by various metal paraphernalia.</p>

Akane stirred on her seat and groaned. She opened her eyes and squinted at the semi-darkness that was enveloping her. Beyond her, she can see the back of a dark haired man outlined against the candlelight. He seemed to be bent over something on the table.

She tried moving her hands but felt them stopped by the leather straps that bounded them on the arms of her hard-backed wooden chair. Akane blinked at them for a couple of seconds. She tried moving her legs afterwards and wasn't surprised at all when she felt them tied too.

'You! Take these off me!' she tried to shout but her voice only came out rough and hoarse.

Ayato merely glimpsed at her sideways for a second before turning his attention back to whatever he was doing.

'No can do, princess. I already let you do want you want last night. You left me with no choice but to remove every single piece of pointed object you hid in that body of yours because of all your attempts to slash your neck every time I had my back turned on you. Besides, I did that for your sake. You almost hurt yourself when you ripped off the first tube I placed on your arm last night.'

At his words, she suddenly became aware of the throbbing pain on the crook of her left arm. Akane looked at it and saw a very thin piece of glass tubing digging into her skin. It was connected to a larger vial with a bulbous head that hung on a wooden pole beside her. It was half-filled with a dark red liquid.

She felt goosebumps erupt all over her arms as she realized what it was.

Blood.

'So you are planning to bleed me to death?' she said, her voice wavering a little. Ayato chuckled.

'No. Why would I do that?'

'Why wouldn't you?'

The man turned on his seat then and looked at her with an intense expression on his eyes.

'I need you to create a mass of new furies. Why would I kill you? I actually need you healthy and well for the next five decades or so in order to supply blood for me. Now don't struggle too much or you'll have the tube stabbing your arm again,' he turned his back on her and bent over his work once more.

She didn't know if she was just imagining things but she thought she heard a genuine note of concern in his voice. That did not stop her, however, from glaring at him. She tried to shift to pull her wrists out of the leather cuffs but immediately stopped. He wasn't joking about the pain when she felt an excruciating ache on her left arm.

Feeling hopeless and weaker by the second, Akane just settled to looking around her surroundings. The windows of the room were located high above the walls much like the ones on churches. There was only one door leading out of the room which, if she would be lucky enough to escape her shackles, would still require her to jump over one long table and a clump of glass vials just to go through. She swallowed as she continued drinking the dank surroundings.

Escape is impossible.

She shook her head to remove the desperate thoughts that suddenly nagged her. Finally admitting to herself that she can't do anything else at the meantime, she decided to just lean back on her seat and watch the man in front of her.

'Hey,' she called out to him after a while.

'Yes?' he answered patiently.

'Why do you need me?'

Ayato stopped on his seat as if contemplating whether to answer her question or not. After a while, he stood up and leaned on the corner of the table closest to her, his arms crossed over his chest.

'You really don't have any idea?'

She merely stared at him. He returned her gaze, his red eyes never leaving her amber ones.

'The ochimizu,' he said after a while. 'The very elixir that your group is working on is the reason. The Shinsengumi believes that it can help them rise to power because of its potent capability to create a higher type of man. Unfortunately for them, they didn't know that they are only tapping the tip of the iceberg. I've spent the past year trying to maximize the solution to its full potential. I'm sure you've noticed from first-hand experience that my rasetsus were faster and stronger than those your group was able to come up with.'

'Yes, and they're also crazier,' she muttered under her breath.

'And it's only because of one thing,' Ayato continued as if she hadn't spoken. His eyes left her face then and looked at something beside her. Akane followed his gaze and found her eyes settling on the glass vial dangling on the pole next to her. By now it was almost full of blood.

She stopped and felt her mouth hung open a little in realization.

\_Blood.\_

'Yes, my blood,' he confirmed her guess even before she can speak it out loud. 'I added it to the medicine. Being a pure blooded oni, it increased the capabilities of my furies. Their strength, healing speed, and power almost became level with that of a real demon because of it. However,' he stopped and cocked his head at her. Akane suddenly felt cold at the change of light playing in his eyes. He now looked at her in a mad, almost hungry manner. 'My blood was too strong for the average human system and caused the men who drank it to immediately descend to madness.'

'I thought it was hopelessâ€| I searched for so long only to find the answer in such a fragile looking girl like you,' he smirked, pushed himself off the table, and slowly approached her. She froze on her seat. Her mind was buzzing and she suddenly felt dizzy. Akane internally flinched as she felt Ayato touch her chin and tip her head back. He looked so dashing and fearsome with the shadows from the flickering candlelight playing on his features.

'Your lineage was the answer to my dilemma,' he whispered to her. 'Even though you are not a pureblood, for some reason, you were able to keep some of the strong abilities of our kind. Your blood has been diluted enough to perfectly balance mine. With you, I can give the power I need to my rasetsus. Your blood will stop them from going mad and also improve their other capabilities,' he leaned his body towards her, their faces merely a foot away from each other now. Suddenly, her head snapped towards the door as she heard shouts erupt from somewhere in the house. Ayato held her chin again and used it to guide her face towards him once more.

'Shhâ€| It's okay. They normally fight and rip each other off,' he cooed and she withdrew back in her chair in revulsion. 'Ah, I remember, did you know that the fury your friends thought they killed was one of my strongest now? Even though your little samurais hit all

his vital organs beyond repair, he was still able to recover. You know why?' he inclined his head and dropped his voice to whisper to her conspiratorially. 'Because he drank your blood. With your help, I can create a whole new army of super humans that will put an end to the stinking civilization currently lording over our world now. It wouldn't take long for me to conquer nations with you by my side,' he smirked at her and started moving closer to remove the distance between them.

'So you see, my dear, you can really say that we are the perfect pair,' he said with a voice of chilling calm. Akane closed her eyes tightly as she felt his breath on her lips. She started struggling again on her seat despite of the pain on her arm.

'Don't come any closer!' she screamed and moved her head away from him. Ayato merely chuckled at her reaction.

'You have no idea how precious you can be, little lamb. I've grown really quite fond of you,' he muttered lowly, causing her breath to catch in her throat. She felt cold sink deep into her marrow, however, at what he said next.

'Sayâ€|why don't I make you my bride? Right now would be a good idea, don't you think?'

She suddenly opened her eyes in surprise. Ayato moved his hand at her nape and gently guided her head towards him. She felt desperation and hopelessness crawl in her body. Amidst the darkness that was slowly enveloping her, Akane found herself silently calling for one name.

\_Okita-san.\_

\* \* \*

><p>Souji slightly opened the wooden door and looked around, his sword clutched tightly on his hand. He and the other captains were currently crouched in what seemed to be the back kitchen of the house they just infiltrated. The manor looked glummier than the one they've attacked last but it was more well-kept and looked like it was actually lived on. Beyond him, he can see a wide room littered sparsely with wooden boxes and a few low tables. The floor seemed to be made of an expensive polished wood and he can see a few pieces of katana hanging on a wall directly across from him. Suddenly, a man stepped out from the right, his back blocking his line of vision from his position. He seemed to be the only one in the room.<p>

Okita squinted his eyes before looking back at the others behind him. They all exchanged nods before he suddenly kicked the door open and barged inside. The man whipped around in surprise and barely had the chance to blink before he plunged his sword through his chest. Saitou delivered the final blow as he slipped behind the enemy like a shadow and slit his throat with his blade.

Okita turned around just as he heard the body thud dully into the floor. His green eyes scanned his surroundings sharply. He was briefly aware of the soft scuffling of the other captains around him as he moved forward in the dimness of the room. Except for the frantic beating of his heart, everything around him seemed to be deathly still and quiet. Souji gritted his teeth as he was suddenly

overcome with the urge to shout and break the silence.

Ever since that morning when they realized she was missing, he felt different, as if his soul temporarily left his body, leaving behind an empty shell. He felt numb. He still hurt everywhere but he was only briefly aware of the physical pain as he waited for news alone in his room.

\_She sacrificed herself. \_

\_Because of me.\_

\_She's gone. \_

\_Because of me. \_

Those phrases echoed again and again in his mind until finally, he couldn't take it anymore and threw the bowl of water beside him right at his bedroom wall, causing it to smash to small pieces. Now, as he stared around his surroundings, he felt the need to break something once more. He wanted to call for his enemies. To hurt them and break them for taking her away.

'Harada, go with Souji and Hajime and look for Akane. We don't know how many guards are here so we have to make it quick,' Hijikata said from the head of the group. Souji returned back to reality as he heard her name. The truth was that he wasn't really allowed to join the mission tonight because of the current state of his body.

However, Hijikata finally gave in when he realized that he will probably just find another way to cut something or someone even when he's at the headquarters. As for him, the only reason he was standing with them now was because of the large doses of Sanyaku that he drank earlier to numb the lingering pain on his wounds. He knew he'll probably pay hard for the exertion he is placing now at his still weak body but as of the moment, he just didn't care. There was only one thing in his mind tonight.

He nodded at the other two captains who stepped out of the group and the three of them started moving towards the dark corridor beyond. They were barely able to make a few steps, however, when a crashing sound suddenly erupted from behind them.

They all looked around to see a man standing in the threshold of the door from where they just entered. He was looking at them with a mixture of shock and fear on his face, the tray of glass vials he was once holding now shattered into a million tiny pieces on the floor in front of him.

A half-second of silence passed before he was suddenly shouting and the room was crowded with twenty or so rasetsus. Souji fell into his attack stance in a heartbeat and his lips widened into a smirk.

'About time all you bastards show your faces to me. I've been meaning to kill all of you,' he growled before lunging at the one nearest him.

Everything turned 360 degrees after that. The once still air of the house was now wrecked by shouts and the sound of fighting. Souji fiercely fought side by side Saitou and Harada who seemed to be as

equally pissed with him at the sudden arrival of the rasetsus. Besides from him and Kondou-san who was as damaged as him at Akane's disappearance, the two were the other ones in the group who seemed to be also badly affected by the unfortunate news.

Blood now covered the floor as Harada slashed at the prime vein of a rasetsu with his spear. On his other side, Saitou easily took down two furies with a combination of different sword thrusts. He turned around in a fast circle, his blade doing a wide arc as he moved. He caught the neck, shoulder, and abdomen of the three men who were just about to jump him at the same time. He stabbed each with a simple flick of his hand and was about to move to another one when the sound of the female voice he knew so well suddenly shattered the dark film that have dimmed his vision ever since the start of the fighting.

Akane.

Barely a second ticked by before he found himself flying towards the sound.

He was suddenly rooted on the spot again, however, at the sight he saw ahead of him. Next to the corridor where the sound came from stood Kondou-san who was currently being cornered by five rasetsus. A rabid-looking one snapped his jaw at him while another one was snarling and trying to slash his face with his hands. He was barely able to fend off the others by swinging his sword like a torch in front of him. Souji watched as his blade slashed the shoulder of the rasetsu who was just about hack at his arm. The fury fell back, his wound healing in an instant, and gave a maniacal laugh before launching himself again at the man.

'Kondou-san!' he shouted and started charging forward when the commander's voice suddenly stopped him on his tracks once more.

'Don't! I'm fine! Go get Akane!' the man shouted at him through gritted teeth. At his words, he automatically whipped around and stared at the next corridor. Then he looked at again at the man struggling on the corner. Suddenly, the reality of the situation finally sank into him.

One. Just one.\_

I have to choose one. \_

It was as if the sound was suddenly turned off around him. Thoughts warred against his mind and heart as he stared at the one man he dedicated his whole life to struggle in front of him. Just a couple of months ago, he wouldn't take a moment of hesitation before jumping in front of a blade to spare Kondou's life. Now, he stood frozen in the middle of a fight, not knowing where to go to.

Save the one man that mattered to you all your life or leave him now to go to a girl you've just met and barely even know anything about?\_

'Souji!' he snapped away from the daze he was in and looked at Kondou whose half of face now sported a thin gash trickling with blood. Out of nowhere, he felt something snap inside him as he looked at the red

liquid. And with that snap came a sudden realization.

He charged forward once more, his decision now made up in his mind.

\* \* \*

><p>Akane choked back a whimper and pursed her lips tightly together as she felt the breath of the man in front of her fan her face. She squeezed her eyes shut more than ever and willed herself to block out what was just about to happen. A split second before their mouths finally met, however, she was suddenly shaken from the sudden desperation flooding her body with the sound of crashing glass. In front of her, Ayato also opened his eyes. She looked at the door the same time he did.</p>

And felt her heart leap as she saw a familiar silhouette outlined on the threshold.

'Am I interrupting something?' said a smirking voice that she will always recognize anywhere.

A dark expression passed over Ayato's features but it was gone even before she can fully take it in.

'The way you always stop me just when I was just about to get something deserves a recognition of honor from the emperor now,' Ayato said, his voice laced with both sarcasm and annoyance. It took him a couple of seconds more before he finally straightened up from his crouch in front of her.

Okita stepped out further into the light, his smirk devilishly triumphant. Akane watched as his eyes flitted over her form first, a cloud of worry tainting them, before it settled again on the dark-haired man.

'Didn't you know that was my sole purpose in life?' he shrugged casually as if talking to a long-time friend. Ayato's grin widened.

'I wouldn't have thought you're still alive. How did you find us?'

Souji stepped over the rubbles of glass on the floor and leaned the back of his sword into his shoulder. Akane's chest constricted at the familiarity of the sight of him. Gone was the sad, weak Okita she left in the room barely a day ago. She can't help but smile from her seat.

\_He's back. Thank God, he's back.\_

'You okay there, kitten?' he called out to her, his green eyes never leaving the man whose red orbs are now glinting maliciously at him.

'Yes,' she answered, her voice clearly showing the relief and happiness she was feeling.

'Good. Now sit back and watch the show first, okay?' he lifted up his sword and gracefully moulded his body into his attack stance. 'These

men just have to settle something here,' he said before launching himself at the raven-haired man in the room.

Ayato smirked and met the man's sword with his own halfway in the air. The musical clink of the two blades starkly contrasted their deathly glint in the candlelight. Both men jumped away from each other, their eyes dancing with fire.

'And here I thought I was at least successful in giving you a serious injury the last time we met,' he remarked.

'You really think someone like you can put me down?' Souji asked, perfectly matching the condescending tone of his opponent. The two smirked at each other then lunged forward again at the same time.

Akane watched in both awe and fear at the dancing swords in front of her. The two matched each other's moves so perfectly, anyone would have thought that they were just practicing. Their blows were all precise and measured as if they synchronized them with each other. Her eyes turned wide as Ayato's blade ran over Okita's shoulder at the same time that the latter was able to cut the former's arm with his sword. Ayato looked down with an impassive look on his face as he watched a thin trail of blood trickle from his skin before the wound closed again in a second.

Akane suddenly snapped out of her thoughts after that. She started struggling again with her bonds but the leather simply dug on her skin. She looked around desperately as she tried to find a way out of her situation. Thankfully, a sudden idea struck her out of nowhere. She peered at the legs of her chair and saw the pair at the back tied to the two wooden foundations of the wall with a rope. Then she straightened on her seat once more and started moving her body left and right, rocking her chair slowly.

Meanwhile, the two men continued their fight in the middle of the room. By this time, Souji was already panting with exhaustion. He may not be feeling the pain of the wound on his side as of the moment but his body still felt weak and slowed him considerably down. Ayato, however, looked the same. In his chagrin, the man smirked at him as if he read his mind.

'Tired already?'

His laugh was barely able to cover his shortness of breath.

'Not even close. In fact, I'm just getting started.'

The man cocked his eyebrow at him condescendingly before his lips split into a grin once more.

'Good. Because it wouldn't be fun to take her away from you again if you lose to me easily.'

At the sound of the slightest reference to her, Souji found himself suddenly seething in anger.

'You will not touch her!' he growled.

Ayato smirked at the way he easily found his weakness. The boy in

front of him may be stronger than a normal human but his mind was as frail as that of an average person. Looking at him now, he was easily able to point out the two things that can waver his perspective in just a snap: Anger and Jealousy. He smiled at this. It wouldn't hurt him now if he can get a little more fun tonight, right?

'Tskâ€|tskâ€|you still don't get it do you? She's mine. I can take her away from you anytime I want. Didn't you know? She was the one who came to me last night. I didn't even need to get her.'

Souji felt pure rage fill him at the sound of the man's words. He propelled himself forward once more and struck. Ayato stepped back a little at the force of his attack but smiled even more widely at the look of anger on the other man's face. Humans. They are such easy creatures to control. He decided to add more fuel to the fire.

'You should thank me. I was so gentle on her last night. I had no choice but to tie her up for the meantime though,' he said as he swung back. Their swords gave a cold, deadly sound as they clashed. Ayato leaned a little forward and dropped his voice to a whisper. 'You wouldn't believe the fight in that girl. I definitely enjoyed every minute I spent last night with her. Who doesn't love a woman who strikes back, right?'

His eyes opened wide in loathing and he found himself curling back his lips, his teeth gritted in anger. Souji's vision almost turned black in anger and he felt all of his energy focused on killing the man in front of him. He swung his sword down, then raised it and slashed it again as quickly as Ayato had blocked it. He didn't care what he was doing anymore. All he wanted was to see him writhing and bleeding on the floor in front of him.

'What did you do to her!'

Ayato stumbled back a little but pulled himself up again easily as he received a particularly nasty blow from his opponent. The boy wasn't this mad the last time that they met. He looked angry beyond insanity then but today, he was different.

'I don't think you would want to know,' he said, his eyes glinting malevolently. Okita gave a frustrated cry and hacked on him again.

From her corner, Akane struggled even more than ever. She was barely aware of the shouts and fighting going on in the middle of the room as she rocked her body harder on her chair. Blood now flowed freely on her arm as the glass tube sank into her skin with her every move. Still she did not stop. Finally, she felt the rope on the left leg of her chair finally break free from the pole it was tied to. Just one. Just one last one.

Okita slashed his sword vertically, withdrew it, then hacked from the other side. In front of him, Ayato ducked away and hit him as furiously as he did. Souji saw his sword glint as he raised it and was barely able to duck when it suddenly sliced the air where his head was just seconds ago.

Ayato regarded the man in front of him a little more cautiously now than before. The last time they fought, he was crippled by the anger

that he was feeling. Now, it seemed to have made him stronger and faster. His eyes turned into slits as he noted how he effectively avoided his last attack.

'What is it that you will get from battling with me? Why are you fighting for her so hard?' he asked now, his voice rid of the sarcasm that he so relished on earlier. Across from him, Souji slid his foot back and put all his weight and force there. His eyes burned like green flames on his face as he propelled himself forward with all he had. They met in the middle, their faces merely a couple of inches from each other and stared each other down. He leaned forward and forced his words out through gritted teeth.

'Because I need to,' he can hear blood pumping in his ears and adrenaline overloading his senses. Every move and every sound seemed to go in slow motion for him. He saw Ayato's eyes widen a little as he stepped forward and pushed him back. The man seemed to be as surprised as him at his sudden strength.

'Because I want to protect her,' he stepped forward again, causing Ayato to stumble a little backwards once more.

'Fool. You are playing a dangerous game. You are of different leagues. You can die now and be forgotten while she can stay with me and conquer worlds,' the man hissed at him and tried to push him back. He noticed how his red eyes now almost turned black. Souji, however, did not waver. From what he felt, his words flared up the fire inside him even more.

He felt the seconds move slower as he stared at him now. Suddenly, he knew exactly what to do. How to move. He stepped back, bent his upper body low and pulled his sword backwards, positioning it in a direct vertical line with his body. He watched as the man also did the same in front of him. Souji removed his left hand on the katana's handle and rested it on the base of the hilt. His eyes moved downwards and landed on his opponent's chest. Then he drove his katana with all the force he had at his heart at the same time that Ayato also plunged forward with his sword. Amidst everything that was happening, he heard himself say the words he never thought he would say in his life.

'I don't care. Because I'd rather die than see her with someone else.'

Metal sank on flesh as green and red eyes met. One pair held determination while the other screamed of disbelief. Time stopped and watched as one man fell into his knees before finally sinking into the stone cold floor.

\* \* \*

><p>Akane gave a short cry of relief as she felt the rope tying the other leg of her chair finally snap. Suddenly, her vision started slipping sideways as she felt her body fall downwards. The last thing she saw before her sight was cut by the table in front of her was Okita and Ayato standing motionless in the center of the room. The next thing she knew, she was crashing hard at the floor, the wooden chair she was bounded to breaking into pieces as she hit the ground. The leather straps holding her hands and feet broke free from the wood as the timber splintered.<p>

She felt a scream ripped out of her lungs at the excruciating pain that flashed on her left arm. She rolled on her side and saw the broken glass tube stabbing deep into her flesh. The vial holding her blood toppled with her during her fall and was now drenching the floor and her clothes with deep red liquid. Akane gritted her teeth as she wrapped her hand around the tube. She closed her eyes then cried again in pain as she pulled it out of her arm in one fast stroke.

She groaned, her eyes almost rolling to the back of her head as dizziness and pain overwhelmed her. Then all of a sudden, she felt her body lifted up and crashed into the wall behind her.

'What do you think you're doing?' she felt her eyes go wide and her senses snap back to normal as she stared at the angry, desperate eyes of Okita in front of her. He was holding her by the shoulders, his fingers painfully digging into them. He was wearing an intense expression of anger, relief, and helplessness that rendered her speechless. Akane opened her mouth to try to say something when suddenly; he pulled her body forward, crashed her into his chest, and wrapped his arms around her.

Time stopped for her.

'Goddamit Akane, don't ever try to do that again! Don't ever do that to me again!' he said through gritted teeth as he buried his face on her shoulder.

'Oâ€|Okita-sanâ€|'

'You stupid, stupid girl. You stupid, idiot girl!' he said again, his voice muffled now by her hair as he sank his face deeper into the crook of her neck. Akane blinked in disbelief, shock temporarily numbing her body. Then, out of nowhere, she felt her eyes suddenly pooling with tears.

'I'm sorryâ€|' she whispered, her voice breaking as tears started flowing down her cheeks. 'I wanted to make it stop. Your pain. I wanted to make it go away,' she felt his arms go tighter around her at what she said.

'Baka! I don't need your help! You're still a girl for god's sake! Don't try putting everything on your shoulders!'

She closed her eyes at the pain in his voice. Without even knowing what she's doing, she raised her arms that were limp on her sides and clutched at his chest. She bowed her head then leaned against him, her tears staining his blood soaked robe.

'I'm sorryâ€|I'm sorry,' she said again and again and started sobbing. She couldn't stop herself. Every fear and desperation that she tried to shove away deep inside her for so long started bubbling out of the surface, flowing until they can't be stopped. Right now, as her body was encircled in his strong arms, she felt nothing more than a poor scared girl tired of all the horrors of the world. She had been strong enough for so long and she's tired. And hurt. and scared.

Akane felt Okita stiffen a little as he heard her sobs. Then he

raised his hand, placed it on the back of her head, and clutched her tighter into him. She felt so small yet she didn't care. She let all the emotional pain roll over her body and let him hold her through her torment. She let him see the weakness that has always been there inside of her but didn't dare show to anyone. She just let herself be weak. Because right now she knew he didn't care whether she's strong or not.

When he spoke again, his voice was soft. She felt his fingers gently wipe the tears off her cheeks.

'Don't do that again, okay? If you try to make me worry again, I'll have no choice but to kill you,' he said, his chin now resting on the top of her head. Akane nodded and pushed her face deeper against his chest. She can almost feel his heartbeat. She closed her eyes and let the sound calm her. What he said next was so soft and faint that she didn't know if it was real or just part of her imagination.

'Though you'll probably the one who'll kill me first if I lose you again.'

## 18. Chapter 17: Home

A/N: Finally. I swear this was the hardest one I've ever written. I'm not sure if this is already good but I've spent almost two days revising it and well, I'm tired. So here you go. Ah, the things I do for the sake of Hakuouki.

\* \* \*

><p>'Shinpatsu! Buy me some squid heads! You ate half of my lunch earlier, I'm gonna need compensation!'<p>

'Eh? No way! I just have enough for okonomiyaki and sake!'

'Hey, look, they've got my favorite shrimp right there. Oi, give me the money you borrowed last week.'

'Why do you have to ask for it now of all times!'

Akane laughed as she watched Heisuke, Harada, and Shinpachi grapple each other playfully beside her. Around them, people were going to and fro, all buzzing with excitement and energy. She gazed at her surroundings for the hundredth time that night. Until now, even as she stood in the middle of the busy pathway of Kyoto's liveliest street, she still couldn't believe what's in front of her eyes.

It was the last day of Gion Matsuri, Kyoto's most popular summer festival, and everything, from the paper lamps lining the sidewalks to the vendors peddling their goods in their small stalls radiated a festive kind of glow and enthusiasm. Children were running here and there, some pulling at their parents sleeves as they plead to be treated on the many games and food lining the street. Leading towards the steps of the temple beyond is a parade composed of men carrying portable shrines and floats. Akane stood on tiptoe to better see the procession and beamed like a child. Summer festivals were no longer new to her but it was her first time to experience one in Kyoto, let alone one held during an ancient period. She sighed happily. Everything was just so different and beautiful.

'Look at them.'

'Oh, so handsome!'

'Such dashing men.'

Her silent appreciation of her surroundings was briefly interrupted when a group of giggling girls suddenly blocked her sight. They were whispering at each other behind the paper fans they were holding, their eyes fluttering flirtingly over her shoulder. Curious, she followed the direction of their stare and found herself looking at her group of friends.

She did not need to think twice to know the reason behind the sudden attention of the women. Despite of herself, she also felt warmth graze her cheeks as she stared at her companions. After guarding the festival almost every day since its start, the boys decided to celebrate their free time on the last day by dropping their usual clothes and wearing the traditional yukata. She was so used to them always being active and moving that it took her off guard seeing them look so relaxed and laidback. Even Hijikata was smiling and laughing with the others. She smiled as she silently watched them. Tonight, they didn't seem like the warriors she always knew them to be. They looked just like a group of friends having fun.

A very attractive group of friends, at that.

'Akane! Let's go try the goldfish scooping okay?!" Heisuke called out to her, shaking her from her reverie.

'Tsk, she's not a child like you!' Shinpachi exclaimed and bumped the younger captain out of the way. 'Hey, Akane let's just try those ring throwing games with the sake bottles. We can win a whole box of alcohol if we win! Come on, help me!'

'Stupid Shinpachi, will you really let a beautiful girl like that play such a manly game? Let's just go to the temple and make a wish there,' Harada winked at her, causing her face to flush once more. She cleared her throat and looked away slightly to hide the red in her cheeks.

Figuring that everyone will be busy enough in the festival, Kondou also gave her the permission to wear whatever she wanted tonight. She now looked down on her clothes consciously, her hands unintentionally straightening them out. Just like the captains, she was also wearing a yukata though hers was just feminine with its cream color and dainty pink trimmings on the hems. She has also let her hair down from the usual high ponytail that she always wore.

'Why don't we do all? We have all night after all,' she smiled up at the three who seemed to be waiting for her answer with bated breath. She laughed as Heisuke and Shinpachi whooped and Harada grinned cheekily at her.

'You really think you're already up for that?'

Akane suddenly turned around at the sound of the voice and felt her breath catch on her throat as she came face to face with Okita.

'Look who's talking,' she quickly answered back, causing his smile to turn into a grin. She hurriedly whipped around to hide the red on her face and started briskly walking towards the deeper part of the stall lined street.

'Hey, where are you going,' Souji called out to her and started following her lazily.

'I need to look for something. Why are you following me anyway?' she answered without even looking at him.

'You can't avoid me forever, you know,' he said from just a couple of steps behind her. She blushed a brighter red at the truth of his words and his tone. Even as she kept her back on him, she clearly heard the smirk on his voice.

'Why w-would I avoid you?' she tried to shot back angrily at him but failed miserably as she stuttered over her words. Akane suddenly felt like kicking something. She did not need to look at him to see him grinning mischievously. She felt it in the way goosebumps erupted from her skin.

'I don't know. Maybe you're embarrassed?'

'Me? embarrassed of you? That will never happen!'

'Look at me then.'

'No.'

'Come on.'

'No!' she answered firmly and quickened her pace. It was all she can do not to flat out run. Behind her, Okita merely chuckled and easily matched her speed with his long strides. Knowing that she'll never be able to shake him off unless she do something, Akane started looking around her frantically for an escape route. She found it after a while in the form of a small, narrow space between two stalls selling japanese traditional masks and paper fans. She nearly cried with joy. Just when she was about to pass it, she ducked, and squeezed herself between the two shops as fast as she can. She emerged on the adjoining street, her chest heaving from both nervousness and exhaustion. After a while, she looked behind her back and sighed in relief when she saw him finally gone.

I'm sorry Okita-san, she quietly thought as she clutched her chest and tried catching her breath. But I just can't look at you and be sure that I won't lose my wits tonight.

From the other street, Souji blinked at the spot where Akane just disappeared to. After a while, he shook his head slowly, an amused grin spreading on his lips.

'Good work, kitten. Unfortunately, you can't escape me forever,' he whispered to himself before turning on his heels, chuckling softly.

\* \* \*

><p>'Ah! Akane! There you are! Come, come!'<p>

Akane was shaken from her thoughts as she heard a familiar voice call out her name. She had been walking around aimlessly for almost half an hour now ever since the embarrassing escape she pulled on Okita. She now looked up and saw Heisuke waving at her enthusiastically in front of a goldfish scooping stall. She approached him after seeing that he was alone.

'Where have you been?' the boy asked and handed her a poi scooper which she reluctantly took.

'Um...I just looked around a little,' she said sheepishly.

'Ah. We've been looking for you everywhere! Shinpachi and Harada wanted so much to play that arrow shooting game with you but it seems like I'll be the one you'll have to accompany first,' Heisuke snickered and crouched over the basin of water filled with small fishes in front of the shop. Akane mimicked him and looked around nervously.

'Um, Heisuke-san? Where are the others?'

'Three stalls down from us. I think they're finally trying that ring throwing thing,' he answered, his eyes never leaving the basin. He raised his hand and dipped the poi he was holding in a flash, catching two fishes in the process. Akane craned her neck to look at the direction he motioned at. Sure enough, Harada and Shinpachi were there competing like crazy as they threw rings on the clump of bottles on the stall. Suddenly, she felt her eyes widen as she recognized the two behind the pair. There, watching and cheering was Saitou and Okita. She quickly looked away and tried covering herself behind Heisuke. After a few seconds, she peeked again.

Souji seemed to still be absorbed in what he was doing.

She sighed in relief.

After peeking at him inconspicuously once more, she decided to turn her attention on the game in front of her. She needed to help Heisuke for now while the other boy was still oblivious of her then maybe just make a quick escape afterwards. She clutched the poi given to her and dipped it on the tub.

After that fateful night when Okita successfully defeated Ayato in the manor, he was immediately sent to Osaka castle to be treated by doctors Kodou and Matsumoto upon Hijikata's orders. The battle has taken a serious toll on his body after he forced himself to go with the mission so he was instructed to stay temporarily under the care of professionals to fully heal. As for Akane, she was also confined in her own room due to blood loss and the wound on her arm. After some intense yet brief scolding from Hijikata and a heartfelt thank you from Kondou, she was ordered to drop all her duties temporarily while she recovered.

And so for two weeks she stayed within the walls of the headquarters to recuperate. And for everyday in that two weeks, she spent the majority of her time sitting on the steps near her room, looking out over the yard as she waited for one man to appear in the gates of the headquarters. She knew it was her fault the Okita was hurt again and

she wanted nothing more than to thank him properly for what he has done for her. And so for a fortnight, she painstakingly waited for his return.

It was all she can do not to bash her head against a wall when she found out she can't even look at him when he did return that morning. For some unknown and infuriating reason, she had felt extremely out of sorts and awkward the first time their eyes clashed over at breakfast. The fact that there were a few times she caught him looking at her as if he's waiting for something didn't help at all with the uneasiness she was feeling. No matter how hard she tried, she just couldn't bear to stare back at his green eyes without remembering everything that has happened that night. Unfortunately for her, Okita was someone who doesn't have the word 'giving up' in his vocabulary. His intense gaze followed her silently all throughout the day, as if seducing her to finally look at him.

And like the fool that she is, she did all she can to avoid and hide from it every single time.

\_ 'Goddamit Akane, don't ever try to do that again! '\_

The events of that night flashed on Akane's mind unwittingly, causing her to accidentally scoop the water with more force than needed. The paper of the small scooper broke in an instant, releasing the small fish caught on its surface back into the water of the tub. Beside her, Heisuke laughed good naturedly before resuming his own game again. She watched a little in jealousy as he scooped his poi again on the water and effortlessly transferred the three goldfishes he caught into the small bowl he was holding. She sighed. There is no way she can focus on anything right now with her current state.

Desperate to divert her attention, Akane roamed her eyes around her surroundings to look for something else to do. After a while, her gaze finally landed on a stall selling hair accessories just a couple of stalls down from her. After briefly excusing herself from Heisuke, she approached it and scanned the pieces laid out on the tray in front of her. A gold and pearl kanzashi caught her eye and she picked it up with a smile. It reminded her of the one she wore when she was disguised as a maiko before.

'That will surely fit you, miss,' the woman behind the stall said to her with a smile. Akane looked up a little in surprise at the sudden sound of her voice.

'Oh, thank you. I'm just looking around though. I don't have the money to pay for it,' she smiled kindly at the vendor and put down the accessory back on its tray. She was just about to bow and leave when she heard her speak again.

'Hm, why don't you just ask your husband to buy it for you then? Mister,' the vendor called out to someone behind her. 'Mister, I'm sure you can spare some money to buy your pretty lady a gift,' the woman called out. Akane froze on her spot. Somehow, she had a chilling idea as to who the woman was talking to. She slowly turned around and sure enough, Okita was there standing just a few feet behind her.

He slowly smirked at her.

Panic and embarrassment rose within her fast and she hurriedly whipped back at the woman in front of her.

'H-He's not m-myâ€"'

'What is it that she wants?'

Her words died in her throat as she looked at Okita who is now peering seriously at the selection of hair accessories in front of him.

'This one,' the woman held up the kanzashi that she picked up before. He reached for it, studied it closely, then looked at her.

'This style doesn't suit you.'

She blinked at him, at a loss for words.

'It's too flashy. It doesn't fit well with your face.'

She just continued gaping at him.

He turned his attention back to the selection in front of him, his face still serious. Akane watched speechless as he picked up a simple black hair comb with white and red roses painted across its smooth wooden surface after a while. He turned it over in his hands for a couple of times before handing it to the woman.

'I'll take this one then,' he simply said.

She finally unfroze from her stupor as she realized what he was doing.

'O-Okita-san, what are you doing?'

Souji looked at her casually.

'I'm buying you a present.'

'Butâ€"'

'You don't like it? I think that style suits you more.'

'No, that's not the pointâ€"'

'You don't like the color then?'

'No! Why are youâ€"'' she choked out as she watched him pay the woman and get the wrapped package from her.

She wasn't able to finish what she was just about to say though when she suddenly froze at the feel of his fingers lightly touching her hair. Akane's eyes widened a little as she felt his fingertips drop to her face and gently graze her cheeks to push back some of the strands that have fallen on her face. After doing that for what seemed like a full minute, Souji finally and gently placed the comb on her hair, a calm and thoughtful look on his face.

The moment their eyes finally met, the memories of that night washed

over her once more like a tidal wave.

\_Him holding her protectively against his body. Her crying and trembling like a small child against his chest. Him touching her hair so gently and wiping the tears off her face. Her letting him see the side of her that she has never allowed herself to show to anyone before. \_

Akane blushed, her eyes still riveted on the green orbs staring at her so intensely. She felt trapped in the beauty of his gaze. Like a firefly who can't help but be drawn to the flame.

'Akane?' his voice was barely a whisper when he spoke.

'Yesâ€|?' she answered, barely aware of how breathy her own voice was.

'We need to talkâ€|about some thingsâ€|'

She swallowed.

'Thingsâ€|?'

He nodded. She watched as he raised his other hand slowly once more to touch her face. Akane felt her heart drum against her chest wildly as she waited for his touch.

She closed her eyes.

'Souji, will you please come here for a second?'

Okita stopped, his hand only mere centimeters from her cheek as Hijikata's voice called out from one of the stalls across the road. Akane opened her eyes and locked gazes with him for a couple of more seconds before he finally blinked and looked away. There was a strange expression on his face, like a combination of embarrassment and annoyance.

'I'm coming,' he called out then looked at her once more. His eyes drifted towards the hair comb she's wearing.

'Later. Don't try to escape, okay?' he mumbled before finally turning and walking away.

Akane stood frozen on the spot, not knowing what just happened. She was only brought back to reality at the sound of a soft chuckle. She looked up to find the woman behind the stall smiling at her knowingly. After a while, she nodded her head towards the direction Okita disappeared to.

'You, young lady, are a very lucky girl.'

\* \* \*

><p>The bell rang once, its chime filling the air with its musical sound. Akane bowed two times, clapped her hands twice, and closed her eyes as she silently whispered her prayer to the spirits.</p>

\_Please let me find my friends. \_

\_Let them and my family in the other world be safe. \_

\_Help me stay strong.\_

\_Help me find my way back home. \_

She opened her eyes a little as the last phrase echoed in her mind. Home. Ever since she arrived at this time, going back and her friends were pretty much the only things that occupied most of her thoughts. Now, as she stared at the smoke of the incense in front of her drifting skyward, she couldn't help but question the heavy feeling that has suddenly overcome her at the thought of that one word.

Is it actually possible? Is it actually possible for her not to want to come back?

'Akane, are you finished? We're going to the front now. The view of the fireworks is the best there,' Harada called out to her, effectively helping her to push back the unwelcome thoughts and feelings that suddenly plagued her. She took another bow in front of the altar before turning towards him.

'Uhm, is it okay if I go around the temple for a while?' she asked a little shyly. Harada laughed at her embarrassed expression and nodded, knowing exactly how she had been itching to look around ever since their party went to the shrine.

'Okay, but don't stay too long, okay? The fireworks will start in a few minutes.'

'Thank you. I'll be back,' she waved and smiled at him gratefully before she turned around and started treading the narrow pathway on the side of the shrine. It was almost midnight and the festival was starting to pick up in energy as it neared its close. With the parade already finished, however, only a few people now lingered on the grounds of the temple. Akane looked around her in wonder, her eyes sparkling at the sheer magnificence of the structure that seemed to glow and pulse with light. Temples and shrines have always been some of her favorite places. The way they stood so reverent and tall has never failed to calm her ever since she was a child.

Akane smiled as she remembered all those times in the past when she visited countless shrines with her family. Immersed in her happy memories, she continued pushing forward, gazing at everything around her in wonder. She was so absorbed in the beauty of things that she didn't notice that she has finally reached the back of the temple. When she finally realized where she was, she was already inside the unbound grounds of the shrine. Not wanting to have someone call her out for trespassing, she quickly turned around to leave. She was barely able to make a few steps, however, when she heard a soft chuckle from somewhere behind her.

She stopped on her tracks and turned towards the direction of the sound.

There, sitting nimbly on the banister of the temple is a child. Her hair, which was just a little over her shoulders was white and she was wearing a white kimono with dainty golden embroidery. She looked no older than five years old. Akane took a step forward and was just about to tell her that sitting on such a place is dangerous when she

noticed the rich shade of gold of her eyes. The child smiled at her innocently as she stared. She was looking at her with a wise, empathic expression that contrasted sharply with her young features.

Out of nowhere, a thought suddenly struck her. White hairâ€|golden eyesâ€|could she beâ€|

'How are you, Akane?' the child asked in a soft sweet voice before jumping from her seat. Despite of the height, she landed gracefully on the ground and started walking towards her nimbly. The girl stopped and stretched out her hand to her. 'You did wellâ€|' she smiled up at her innocently.

She felt her mouth hang open a little as she finally confirmed her guess.

'You're the...You're the woman from my dream...Hanae...' she stuttered, not believing her eyes. In front of her, the child simply smiled at her once more before offering her hand again. She stared at it.

'I'm not going to hurt you.'

She just shook her head slowly

'I don't understand what's happening.'

The girl chuckled softly then slowly took her hand. She led him to the steps of the temple and pulled at her arm to motion her to sit down. Akane sat down reluctantly. Suddenly, the moon peeked from behind a cloud and washed them with its soft glow. She stared in awe as the light played on the girl's angelic features daintily. Her mind was muddled with thoughts she can't quite grasp. Then, she felt the small hand holding her own tighten around a little. Hanae stared at her with big, wise eyes and a thoughtful look on her face.

'Let me tell you a story,' she said, her voice barely a whisper. Entranced and confused, Akane couldn't do anything more than nod her head.

The girl smiled at her before looking at the sky. A faraway look had immediately descended on her face. .

'In a time long ago, way before humans learned how to speak words, there lived a girl and a boy who couldn't be any more different from each other. The girl was made of everything pure and light while the boy was the son, heir, and ruler of darkness. They were the embodiment of everything contrasting in the world. Day and night. White and Black. Light and Dark. Despite of being opposites, however, the two lived together in harmony. Their differences, instead of being a curse, were a blessing to them as they balanced each other out. Together, they created the equilibrium that the sequence of nature needed. Together, they breathed life to a whole new race that is both different and similar to the humans who walked the earth: the onis.'

Akane drew back a little, shocked at what she heard. Beside her, Hanae continued her story with her soft, lilting voice.

'Through the years they lived in peace, watching their children help mould the history of humans with the power given to them by their lineage. Their sons and daughters were good leaders and heralded some of the most important turns in world's history. Things flourished and thrived under their cooperation with humans. For years, everything went well.'

'Time, however, had a different plan. In an unfortunate turn of events, the power shifted until finally, the era came when the ones who were once torchbearers were forced into hiding in the darkness. The people who were once held in such great regard were now chastised, feared, and exiled as humans learned their own way in the world and fought to take control of the reigns on their own.'

'Together with the seclusion of his sons and daughters came the suffocating blackness that ate the father of the demon race. His anger and bitterness was so great that it pushed him to break and destroy the balance that he once held in such high regard. Alas, after a long period of struggling and fighting, there came a time when his madness finally overcame him and his darkness can no longer balanced by his other half's light. For the first time ever since the world was created, humanity was placed on the brink of total destruction as he planted seeds of threat on the universal balance of things.'

Hanae suddenly stopped, causing her to knit her brows in confusion. She wanted to know what happened next. She was just about to ask her to continue when suddenly, the child turned to her with a grave look in her golden eyes.

'The restoration of that balance was the reason why you're here, Akane.'

\* \* \*

><p>Her heart seemed to have stopped functioning, her mind's processes placed on a lockdown at the girl's words.</p>

'What do you mean?' she asked. Suddenly, her throat felt dry and her voice came out hoarse. She felt the other's hold on her hand tighten a little.

'You have read the book. Am I right?'

For a while, she didn't know what she was talking about. Then suddenly she thought of the novel about the Shinsengumi that her mother gave her years ago. Akane nodded her head slowly, not really knowing where the conversation was going.

'In that book, have you read anything about Ayato?'

She immediately tried scanning every page in her mind.

'No...No, I don't think so...'

'Have you ever wondered why?'

She shook her head.

Hanae squeezed her hand once more with her small ones.

'He wasn't in the scripture because in that universe, my daughter, he doesn't exist.'

Her eyes widened in surprise at what she said. All of a sudden, the warmth inside of her slowly started to dissolve, replaced by a cold feeling that advanced ominously over her system like a stealthy toxin. She stared at the child in front of her not knowing what to say. Hanae looked away from her and stared at the silver sky beyond.

'A year ago, there was a small but intense struggle that happened between two great races of onis. The war was brief and effectively hidden from the world of humans. When it ended, however, both houses who were involved were irrevocably damaged because of their losses. One of it was the lineage of the Kazamas, the great clan who lorded the West. This unfortunate battle cost the family to lose the youngest master of their house...'

'Kazama...' Akane whispered to herself in a voice laced with horror as she recognized the name. After a while, she gasped as realization finally settled within her.

'You can't mean-' she said haltingly, her voice shaking a little. She swallowed and stopped before speaking once more. 'Ayato? But why was he alive?'

'He was saved.'

'Saved?' she asked, more confused than ever. Hanae stood up from her seat and went down the temple steps. When she reached the foot of it, she turned to face her once more. Her golden eyes were shining with a mixture of regret, anger, sadness and fear so intense she nearly choked at the sight of it.

'My other half decided to pull him out of the abyss before he totally descended to death. Being a member of the higher order, he wasn't allowed to interfere with humans directly and needed someone to do his plans for him. Ayato, with his ideals and personal beliefs of onis being superior to humans was the perfect pawn. He brought the boy back in exchange of him dedicating his life in bringing back the power, position and authority held by our race before.'

Akane listened to her with her eyes wide open in fear and horror. The coldness she was feeling has now fully and painfully sank under her skin like painful needle pricks. She felt herself shiver.

\_The ochimizu. The new breed of rasetsus. Ayato's wish to conquer the world. Her blood. \_\_  
><em>

'But why me? Why am I here?'

It took a while for the child in front of her to answer. For a while, she only stared at her with an apologetic and grave expression on her face.

'I cannot undo what he has done,' Hanae finally whispered after a moment. 'What my power allows me to do was to balance out everything

he does. I cannot change events but I can bend time and that's what I did when I called for you. He plucked Ayato from the land of the dead and I summoned you from your own world. You were his match in this reality, Akane. I needed someone I can counter him with so I brought you here. With you not being someone who is originally attached to this world, you have the power to take away another deviation in this dimension.'

Akane sat stunned for a couple of seconds as she let what Hanae said sink in. Her mind was swirling with everything she said and she felt suddenly disoriented.

'I am sorry, child.'

That caused something to snap within her. Suddenly, all the emotions running through her body coalesced into one great ball of fury. She stood slowly on her seat and grasped the banister near her for support. She felt thick, undiluted anger flowing through her veins.

'Sorry? Did you even consider me? Did you, even for just a second, thought that there is a possibility that I don't want this!' she shouted at her, her voice ringing loud and furious in the walls of the temple. 'Why me? Why, of all people, did you have to choose me!'

In front of her, Hanae only looked at her with the same grave and apologetic look on her face. Akane grasped the wood of the banister she was holding even more tightly and looked around her in frustration.

'I have a family who is probably worried sick of me now and friends who I'm not sure are still alive! I have a life, Hanae-san! And you just ripped me away from it so that I can play pawn to your game of chess with your husband!' she cried. She knew she was being unfair and unreasonable. Even though she perfectly understood that she only did it for the good of many, however, she just couldn't squash down the hurt that suddenly clouded her chest. She felt tricked, played, and cheated.

\_Why was I kept blind about all of this? \_

\_Why do I have to be the one to go through with it?\_

\_Why did it have to be me?\_

\_It's unfair. It's so unfair.\_

Dark thoughts rolled in her mind like a tidal wave threatening to destroy and drown everything on its path. She leaned heavily on the pillar beside her for support. In her peripheral vision, she saw Hanae slowly ascend the steps once more. She ignored her. She was concentrating too much on not collapsing on her spot.

'I'm sorry, Akane. Please, forgive me. It was only you that I can ask for help. You were the only one that had the strength and the heart to do it,' she whispered. And suddenly, like magic, her voice soothed some of the tremors on her body. She still felt angry but her shaking has stopped. The next thing she knew, Hanae has shifted her appearance and turned into the woman she saw in her dreams.

'Your family knew this was going to happen. That was the reason your mother raised you so meticulously. And for the strength you showed in handling all the things around you, I knew she succeeded in preparing you for this,' she stopped and Akane felt her hands rest on her shoulders gently. She felt warm, like a candle emitting its calming glow. 'As for your friends, there is no need for you to worry. They are safe and sound in your world.'

That shattered the sudden darkness that descended on her.

'They're alive?' she gasped and loosened her bone cracking grasp on the banister she was still clutching.

The woman nodded to her.

'Oh God. Oh thank God,' she said and covered her mouth in relief. She felt tears streaming down her cheeks. The anger inside of her dissipated as quickly as it came and was instantly replaced by relief. Hanae watched her cry silently for a while, her golden eyes still troubled.

'I hope you will grant me your forgiveness for all the things I've put you through, child,' she said with a soft voice after a while. 'Believe it or not, I tried my best to protect you from all the pain as much as possible. But I am bounded, and my influence on you is limited. The best I can do was to put you under the care of people who I knew can protect you.'

Akane felt a pang of guilt echo dully within her at the truth behind the woman's words. She may have suffered a whole lot more than all the pains combined in the seventeen years she spent in her real world but she was still breathing, alive, and very much herself because of the people that never left her side ever since she arrived in this time period. If Hanae helped her cross paths with the people she now call friends, then she also did something right for her at the very least.

She bowed her head.

'I don't like what you did...' she whispered with a small voice. 'But thank you...for at least giving me the chance to meet them,' she added a little shyly.

Hanae smiled at her.

'Thank you. Your heart, it's truly great.'

She couldn't help but smile at her words. All of a sudden, she felt so small standing in front of her. The woman gently raised her chin with her fingers and stared deep into her eyes.

'Thank you for being strong, my daughter. Because of your help, you were able to guide those around you and helped bring back things to the way they should be. Ayato is now gone. Even though the balance is still not restored, the peace of the world is intact for now. You've helped secure the safety of the people in this realm.'

Akane blushed at the look on the woman's eyes. She was looking at her with the kind of pride a mother would only give to her best daughter.

She felt her throat constrict with emotion. It was the same look that her mother have always given her. She nodded and smiled back, her heart feeling light for the first time in months. Hanae pulled her into an embrace and cradled her as if she's a small child.

'You shouldn't be afraid now. You've lived through the worse and now you can come back knowing that you've become stronger than before.'

Akane smiled, closed her eyes, and let the soothing voice of the woman envelop her. She felt like someone who has finally found her way after an agonizing long time of being lost. She slowly raised her arms to wrap them around the girl when suddenly, something she said rang on her mind. She opened her eyes again and slightly took a step back. A heavy feeling has descended on her chest once more.

'You said..come back?'

The woman nodded at her.

'Come back...where?' she asked, her voice trembling very very slightly.

Hanae gave her a warm smile and stroked her hair gently.

'Home, Akane. You can now come back home.'

#### 19. Chapter 18: The Blooming of the Bud

A/N: Suffering from major writer's block. Bear with me.

\* \* \*

><p>Souji leaned on the wooden fence and gazed at the scenery in front of him. He smiled into the night, closed his eyes, and let the wind blow his hair gently. He and the others were currently standing on a low cliff in front of the temple overlooking Kyoto together with a loose pack of people who were all whispering excitedly about the fireworks display that will happen in a few minutes. Below him, lights twinkled on the city like stars scattered on a velvet blanket while the full moon above casted everything with its brilliant streaks of light.</p>

'Have you seen Akane? Kondou-san is looking for her.'

At the sound of her name, he immediately opened his eyes and turned around to see Saitou beside him. Then he looked around, his face falling into a slight frown as he scanned his surroundings.

'Wasn't she just with us?' he said after he confirmed that there was indeed no trace of Akane anywhere near them. That girl, he thought ruefully. She must be avoiding him again.

Ever since he came back that morning, Akane spent all of her energy trying to avoid him. Souji suddenly grinned as he remembered how she purposefully evaded all his efforts to talk to her. It amused him how she averted her gaze every time her eyes accidentally strayed to his direction or how she flushed whenever she felt his eyes on her which, for the record, he almost kept strictly trained on her all day.

It was not only until tonight that her actions started to get on his nerves and he finally decided to corner her in the accessory stall. In the two weeks that he stayed in Osaka Castle, he spent all his time rehearsing everything that he wanted to tell her. He wanted to scold her for being a brat and going on her own in exchange for Kondou, he wanted to give her a lecture about how she has a tendency to do things without thinking of the other consequences, he wanted to yell at her for making people worry.

And he wanted to just see her until he's convinced that she's safe and sound again.

'You have a strange look on your face.'

He was shaken from his reverie and immediately looked at his friend who was now watching him with an odd expression.

'I'm sorry, what?'

The third division captain sighed exasperatedly.

'I asked if your wounds are hurting because you have a strange look on your face.'

'Ah. No. I'm fine.'

Saitou looked at him calculatingly for a while. For some reason, his gaze made him feel restless and uncomfortable. Souji remembered how he had always teased him about his knack of giving unsettling looks. It was only now that he's finally getting one from him that he realized how uncomfortable it is to be placed under the infamous 'Saitou stare'.

'What?' he finally snapped after almost a minute and a half of staring. Saitou looked at him for a couple more seconds before finally turning his gaze on the scenery in front of them.

'You've changed. Sometimes, I don't feel like you're Souji anymore.'

He gaped at his unexpected words. After a while though, he knit his eyebrows together as their meaning sank into him.

He's right. He's changed. A lot. \_

'Is it that bad?' he mumbled as he leaned lower into the fence. Saitou looked at him sideways with a pensive expression.

'No. It's just different.'

He gave a bark of laughter.

'Good. Because if it's bad, I may have to track down and kill the one who did this to me.'

'Well, at least that one is still the same.'

'What?'

'The way you still want to kill people for reasons I don't understand.'

Souji doubled over in laughter at what he said. When his chuckles finally subsided a little, he looked at the man beside him and cocked his head playfully.

'Guess even someone like me can change, huh? You better give it a try, Hajime. You might like it,' he grinned at him.

Saitou briefly threw him one of his very rare smiles. 'Maybe not in this lifetime.'

He smirked at him and was just about to tease his friend about his chronic fear of changes when they heard a shrill girly scream somewhere behind them.

'Aaaaaa-neeeeeee-chaaaaan!'

The pair turned just in time to see a flash of brown fly out of nowhere. The blur whirled round and round, gushing words they can't quite understand. When it finally settled into a bounce, they recognized the form of an excited looking Sakura tackling a stunned Akane who seemed to have just emerged from the pathway of the temple. Souji smiled secretly to himself as he watched the girl try to inconspicuously pry herself out of the other's grasp.

The smile froze on his lips quickly, however, when he got a closer look at her face.

He had seen her angry, in pain, happy, and sad before but it was his first time seeing her with such a heavy expression on her eyes. A frown was gracing her usually calm features and there is something on the set of her shoulders and lips that greatly unsettled him.

Souji knit his eyebrows as he watched the girl. After a few more lame attempts to free herself from Sakura's bone cracking embrace, Akane seemed to have finally sensed his stare and finally lifted her eyes to lock with his own. His breath caught on his throat as the look in her brown orbs fully registered to him. Instead of avoiding him the way she did all throughout the day, she now stared at him with a look so confused and lost he nearly ran to where she was just to ask her what's wrong. She held his gaze for a couple of seconds, his mind trying to process the emotion behind her gaze. Before he can determine it, however, she broke the connection by directing her eyes downward.

That simple movement caused something dark and heavy to suddenly roll inside of him. Souji clenched his fist as he followed Akane with his gaze. He didn't have any inkling of an idea about what was wrong or what made her like that. There was only one thing that he was sure of.

The feeling that suddenly flooded his veins?

It was fear.

\* \* \*

><p>'Neh, Akane, is it your first time to watch the fireworks here in

Kyoto? It's my first time too so I'm really excited! I heard they have the grandest display here!'<p>

Akane tried to smile at the girl beside her but only managed to give an awkward grimace. Sakura did not seem to notice, however, as she continued her story. She just stared unseeingly at her friend, the events from just a couple of minutes ago still echoing in her mind.

Home. That one word that she has worried over in the past few months has finally become a reality. Ayato is gone, she successfully did what was expected of her, her friends are alive, and she can now go back to her family. Everything turned out perfectly well. So why is she feeling not a single trace of happiness at all?

I don't belong here. \_

She etched those four words on her mind until it hurt. It was true. She really didn't belong there. She was just a mere glitch. A deviation much like Ayato. It shouldn't really be hard to leave, she thought. After all, everything she has is waiting for her back in her real world. She needed to return to her family and friends. To the life that was waiting for her on the other side of this world.

'I am so glad my parents let me go tonight. We were so packed earlier that I thought I wouldn't be able to spend some free time on my first festival. I'm so happy that I get to enjoy my first one in Kyoto with you Akane!'

Akane felt a dull pain creep in her chest at Sakura's words. She looked over again at the girl who was now staring up at the sky with a smile on her face. For a moment, a flash of jealousy overcame her senses. Sakura looked so calm and happy at just being here. Of living in the present. She felt a tightening on her throat as she stared at her.

She'll definitely miss her.

'Sakura-chan?'

The girl looked at her, her smile still in place.

'Hm?'

'Thank youâ€|for everythingâ€|' she whispered. It was all she can do not to let out the sob that was struggling to free from her voice. It'll be the last time she'll see her. The hyperactive miss who became her only girl friend in this period thanks to a strange twist of events. Her crazy friend.

'Eh? Why are you feeling so sentimental all of a sudden, Akane-chan?' the brunette asked as she beamed at her then hugged her playfully. She couldn't help but chuckle a little. Akane lifted her arms to return the embrace and held on to her as if she's afraid of disappearing right then and there.

'Nothing. I just felt like thanking you,' she whispered, her voice shaking a little.

Sakura chuckled. 'Well, thank you too,' she said before pulling away.

'I was never really good with friends because I seem to scare them away all the time but you stuck with me. You don't know how much that meant to me,' she pulled away and regarded her at arm's length. 'You made everything better for me here in Kyoto. Even though sometimes you act strangely,' she added, chuckling. Akane couldn't help but laugh with her.

'Says the girl who exposed me to a restaurant full of men and tortures the boy she likes,' she teased her back. At her words, Sakura suddenly stopped laughing and blushed. She dropped her hands from her shoulders and started fidgeting.

'Uhmâ€|about thatâ€|'

Akane frowned a little at her friend's reaction.

'Yes?'

'Is itâ€|is it okay if I leave you here for a moment? I just want toâ€|uhm..say hello to him,' the girl asked with an embarrassed look on her face. Akane stared at her uncomprehendingly for a moment before her lips finally broke into a knowing smile.

'Of course. Why are you asking me for permission?'

'You won't get angry even if I leave you here?' Sakura looked at her with eyes full of guilt, it made her laugh.

'Come on. I know you want to watch it with him. I may not seem like the type, but even I know that myth about having the person you like stay with you forever if you watch the fireworks beside him.'

Her friend suddenly beamed at what she said. Then in a split second, her face fell again into a slight frown.

'You're sure it's okay?' she asked again.

'Go,' she laughed and playfully pushed her back. Sakura grinned at her gratefully and pulled her into a brief hug once more before running off to the direction of Heisuke, Shinpachi, and Harada. The smile on her face withered into a sad one as she watched the girl glomp an unsuspecting Heisuke, causing Harada and Shinpachi to collapse into fits of laughter as they watched their friend sputter and struggle. She sighed. She'll miss that.

'Mind inviting me in that baffling mind of yours?'

She suddenly looked up in surprise to see Okita grinning beside her. The moment she looked at his eyes, Akane felt a dull pain shoot through her chest once more. She quickly looked away and bowed her head a little to hide the conflicting emotions that she knew was being clearly mirrored on her features.

'Cornering me again, Okita-san?' she asked in a voice that wavered a little. She heard him chuckle and saw him lean on the fence casually in her peripheral vision.

'I told you, trying to avoid me will just make things worse for you.'

'I'm not avoiding you.'

'Oh yeah?'

She nodded. 'Why should I?'

'I don't know. All I know is that you spent all day trying to get away from me as far as possible.'

She blushed at the truth in his words. Not knowing how to react, she simply decided to just keep silent. Somehow, she suddenly lost the appetite to deny and cover up things.

Beside her, Souji's smile faded as he looked at her from the corner of his eye. Even as he talked to her now, he still couldn't figure out what was wrong or what she was thinking.

'If this is about what happened in the manor, you don't have to worry too much about it. I went there because it isn't right to let you sacrifice yourself like that. Besides, it was not only me who helped. The others were there too,' he finally said after a while, his voice low and serious. She inadvertently looked up at his tone and blushed redder when she saw the expression reflected in his green eyes. He seemed to be trying to see right through her with the depth of his gaze.

'Akane?'

'H-Hai?'

'Don't ever try to do that again. Understand? You'll be hurting people more if you disappear.'

She felt her heart skip a beat at what he said. With that look in his eyes and the tone of his voice, she was suddenly overtaken with the urge to tell him everything. About who she is, why she's here, and how she can't promise to stay. It took all of her willpower to look away from him and stare at the nightscape beyond. She can't afford to let him see the tears that suddenly wanted to spill from her eyes right then and there.

'I'm sorryâ€œ!' she whispered with a voice so soft he barely caught it. Souji tightened his hold on the banister he was leaning on. He felt desperate, almost helpless as the two of them collapsed into a silence that was full of unspoken thoughts. Not wanting to finally break the connection, he forced himself to smile and looked at the girl beside him.

'Anyway, even if you wanted to, you know you can't escape me whatever you do,' he said teasingly. His voice sounded light and teasing but Akane felt her heartbeat quickening at the seriousness that laced it. She swallowed the lump in her throat and forced herself to answer in the steadiest voice she can manage.

'Always so confident, aren't you?' she finally said, thankful that her sounded nonchalantly playful. He laughed.

'I have good reason to be,' he winked at her. Akane rolled her eyes at him, a sudden urge to humor him back surging within her. Why not? she thought.

\_It will be the last time, after all. \_

'This game of cat and mouse is something you will unfortunately lose, Okita-san,' she said in a patronizing tone. For a moment, she felt like they were just having one of their usual pointless arguments once more. Inside her though, she was screaming at him the words she couldn't say. Her hands found the railing of the fence in front of her and clutched it firmly.

\_I'm leaving. \_

\_I'm going back home. \_

\_I'm never seeing all of you again. \_

Beside her, she clearly saw the effect of her words in his stance. He seemed to have stiffened and his cynic smile faltered a little. For a moment, she thought he was finally able to figure things out. The troubled look in his eyes, however, told her that he was still trying to find the answers to his questions. That was something she has always liked about him. He may be snarky and cocky most of the time but she knew, from the way his eyes silently watched everything around him, that he was the one that was most aware of what's happening around him.

And right now, she knew he was trying his best to understand her.

'You really think so?' he asked after a while. Akane started at the sound of his voice in mild shock. His tone was so different and didn't match up to the expression on his face just a moment ago. His eyes have changed light and his lips quirked on the corners, tinged with a mixture of stubbornness and confidence. He took a step towards her.

'Sorry to tell you, kitten but this is one game I am sure to win,' he said in a voice that made warmth spread in her body. There was a look on his face that made her want to run, hide, and get close to him at the same time. She just stared at him, a little open-mouthed, not knowing how to react. Her breath caught on her chest as he took another step towards her and leaned his body closer to her. What he whispered next, however, was what really made her heart stop functioning entirely.

'After all, you cannot lose if the one you're playing with doesn't really want to run away from youâ€¦right?'

Akane felt time stop. She looked at him with wide eyes. He looked at her with his sure ones.

Above them, the sky was suddenly lit with blossoms of colorful light that now bathed the surroundings with their kaleidoscopic glow. They graced the night sky with their sparkle, decorating it like bursts of flowers that glittered in various hues. Amidst the cheer of the people and the distant cracking sound of the fireworks, however, stood two people who, for a slice of time, felt more together than they've ever been before.

\* \* \*

><p>Akane tightened the knot on her sneakers and straightened up from her crouch. She looked over the small mirror in her room and nearly winced as her pale image registered to her. She raised her hands to her cheeks and tried pinching them to bring some color to her face. It was hopeless. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and opened them again once more. Then she turned around and scanned her room slowly for the last time that night.</p>

Her gaze touched the yukata she slept on for months, her clothes that were now neatly folded on the foot of her mattress, the sword holder on the corner of the room, the bow that she always practiced with leaning against the wall, and the light blue Shinsengumi robe hanging on the small hook near her dresser . Her eyes stayed stuck on that last piece longer than necessary. It's really happening, she thought. She's really, finally leaving.

Not wanting to dwell more on things, she forced herself to take a step towards the door. She was just about to open the shoji screen when something red suddenly caught her eye. She glanced up and stopped mid-step as she recognized the item. There, lying on the small counter is the charm that Okita gave her a couple of months ago and the comb he gave her earlier. She stared at it for a while, her chest constricting painfully. Slowly she approached the low table and picked them up. After a moment, she slipped both on the back pocket of her jeans. Then she turned once more, opened the door as quietly as she could and strode into the night before she can even change her mind.

\* \* \*

><p>When she reached the temple, the moon was already way up in the sky. There was not a single sign left of the grand festivities that happened just a couple of hours ago at the silence that now pervaded the air around her. Akane took a couple of cautious steps forward, her eyes trying to adjust in the dimness.</p>

'Akane.'

She whipped around at the sudden sound of the voice that came behind her.

'Hanae-sama,' she whispered as the form of the white haired child finally registered to her clearly against the dimness. Hanae smiled at her and took her hand. Despite of herself, she also felt a small smile tug at the corners of her lips as she let herself be towed into the temple steps. They stopped just directly on the foot of the staircase, Hanae skipping a few steps up before perching herself daintily on one.

'Have you said your goodbyes?' she asked her with her sweet clear voice.

Akane felt her smile bleed out of her face at her question. She dropped her gaze momentarily and sat on the lowest step. Cold seemed to have crept within her out of the blue. She drew her knees to her body and wrapped her hands around it to try to keep herself warm.

'Yes, I did,' she whispered more to herself. She sensed Hanae's eyes

on her back and knew that the oni was looking at her now with both sadness and confusion. Even though she hasn't said anything, Akane was sure that the woman knew of her feelings. She heard her little feet shuffling behind her and felt her small hand on her shoulder after a while.

'Do you not want to go home, child?' Hanae asked with a voice so wise it was completely at odds with her young timbre. She bowed her head, leaned it against her knees, and closed her eyes.

'I do. I want to go home,' she answered after a while, her voice finally cracking from all the tears she tried to keep within herself all night. Suddenly, it felt like a switch was flipped inside her as wave after wave of emotions overcame her. She stifled a sob, her tears leaving damp spots against her jeans. She didn't need to say anything more to let Hanae know the rest of her feelings. Behind her, the child squeezed her shoulder in a consoling manner and let her cry for a minute, giving her the emotional release she denied herself all night.

'Forgive me! If I've put you all through this,' she heard her say after a while. Akane shook her head vigorously. It's not anybody's fault that she was feeling that way. She knew the emotions she was nursing now were entirely at odds to what the situation calls for but she couldn't help it. She just needed to cry. To let it go.

'I'll be ready when you are, child. Just tell me. You can take your time,' Hanae whispered once more behind her. She slowly nodded and squeezed her eyes tighter. She didn't know how long she cried. All she knew was that she was desperate to pour everything out, hoping that the heaviness inside her will lighten even for just a little.

After a while, when her eyes were already too tired and drained to produce any more tears, she raised her head and stared at the yard beyond. Then she stood up and slowly faced Hanae behind her. She didn't even bother trying to dry the still wet streaks on her cheeks. She looked at the girl in front of her for a while. Then she nodded.

Hanae stared back at her before giving a small, sad smile.

'Are you sure?'

She stayed silent for a moment.

'Yes!'

The child stood up from her seat, slowly trodded down the steps and paused, once more, at the foot of it. Then she raised her arm in offer to her. Akane stared at it momentarily before she finally pushed herself to descend the stairs. The moment she finally touched the child's hand, she felt warmth spread from the tips of her fingers to her whole body. She sighed.

'Then so be it!' Hanae whispered into the night.

Around them, slivers of light suddenly appeared from thin air. The rays swirled languidly around her at first, her eyes following their graceful stirring in space. After a while, she noticed their speed

picking up. In just a few moments, the slivers have almost become a solid mass of light rotating with blinding swiftness around her.

The air surrounding them shifted and lifted her hair from her face. Akane closed her eyes and tightened her hold on Hanae's hand. This is it. There's no turning back. For the last time that night, she let herself drown in the memories and the people she met in her brief stay in that world.

A sword.

A bow.

An arrow with a red ribbon.

The yard.

Her room.

The light blue haori.

Kondou's fatherly warmth.

Sannan's cleverness.

Hijikata's strict but unexpected kindness.

Shinpachi's humor.

Heisuke's warm, infectious laugh.

Sakura's energy.

Saitou's guidance and understanding.

Harada's gentleness and companionship.

And Okita.

His eyes.

His green, deep, searching gaze.

All of a sudden, she ripped her eyes open and pulled hand away from Hanae's hold. Akane took a step back, her heart thudding painfully in her chest. Her body was in shock at the sudden wave of emotions that racked it the moment Okita's eyes registered behind her closed lids. She did not even notice the light around her disappearing the moment she let go of Hanae's hand. She looked at the ground in front of her unseeingly and tried to make sense of the feeling that suddenly gripped her. It was both familiar and unfamiliar.

And it was strong.

'Akane? What's wrong?' Hanae asked with a concerned voice and took cautious step towards her.

She only shook her head and raised her hand as if to ward her away. Even as she stared at the child in front of her now, scenes played in front of her eyes as clear as day.

\_He was pulling the sword she threw at him from his sleeve that day he tested her in the training room. He was sparring gracefully with Saitou under the early morning light looking like a pagan god. He was looking up at her in horror as she shielded him from the rasetsu. He was blushing as he gave her the charm he got from the temple. He rushed to her in concern that night he first met Ayato in the ochiya. He was lying, pale, weak and hurt at Kondou's disappearance. He was pulling her into his arms, his voice desperate that night in the manor. He looked deep into her eyes as the fireworks lit the night sky above them.\_

Every scene, every moment, seemed to wake something inside her slowly. Like someone who has just roused up from a long, dreamless sleep, Akane looked around her as if seeing things for the first time. Then like a crashing train, realization hit her hard and fast. All of a sudden she knew the reason why time always seem to stop every time their eyes meet, why her heart always stops beating every time he smiles, why she felt like she was being ripped apart from the inside every time she sees him in pain.

Or why, no matter how hard she tried to reason out with herself, she felt like dying at the thought of leaving.

'Akane? Talk to me! are you alright?'

She gently shook her head.

'I'm sorry. I'm sorry I can't leave,' she said with a hushed whisper. In front of her Hanae's face registered concern and confusion.

'You can't? Why?'

Akane looked up at the girl in front of her slowly, her eyes the clearest they've ever been.

'Because I'm in love with him,' she finally said with a voice strong and sure.

Yes.

I'm in love with Okita Souji.

## 20. Chapter 19: Okairi

A/N: So...finally an update huh? thank you for all the reviews! and sorry if updates are very rare. my life is so crazy right now. This chapter's very short but it's because it's sort of special for me and I don't want to mix it with anything else. The next chapter will be up tomorrow. Oh, and I placed some lyrics of the song that inspired this chapter. Here's the url if you want to listen to it: [watch?v=9A2U65wxP3s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9A2U65wxP3s). See you again tomorrow. :)

\* \* \*

><p>I take one step away,<p>

Then I find myself coming back to you,

My one and only, one and only you,

-Your Song

The wind lashed around her like whips, deafening her ears and stinging her eyes. There was a stitch on her side and her chest felt like it'll burst from exertion. Still, she didn't care. She ran the fastest she's ever had in her whole life towards that one place that seemed to have been burned in her mind's eye. She ran and ran, barely aware of the dull sound the soles of her sneakers were making against the gritty ground. Her breath came in painful gasps and her muscles screamed in pain but she was oblivious of everything except for one thing.

She needed to see him.

\_Souji.\_

\_Souji.\_

\_Souji!\_

Akane didn't know when she started thinking of him by his first name. But then again, she also didn't know when or how she fell for him. All she knew was that at one point, she felt safe. Then, like a movie, everything came crashing into place as the story reached its climax. She felt scared, thrilled, confused. Despite all of the emotions churning within her, however, she didn't dare dwell on all of them long enough. She can't even if she wanted to anyway. Because right now, there was only one thing flooding her mind and blinding her senses.

\_Souji.\_

Her body felt numb but there was something burning hot in her chest that kept her running straight back to him. She briefly remembered the confused look on Hanae's face as she uttered her realization and how she backed away from the oni's advance as if she's afraid she'll take her away. For a brief moment, she looked at the child as a threat. Then she saw something flicker across her golden orbs before the girl gave her a soft smile. She didn't need to say anything else. Hanae just nodded and smiled at her as if she already knew it even before she realized it. The next thing she knew, she was rushing towards the child, embracing her tightly, before dashing out into the night again.

She closed her eyes as a deluge of images crowded her mind once more. Why she didn't realize her feelings sooner, she didn't know. All she knew right now was that everything about him seemed to call out to her. His face, his smile, his lips. He changed everything. And she knew she wouldn't be the same if she leaves now.

Beyond her, she can now see the gate of the headquarters looming against the dark. With a last spurt of energy, she pushed her limbs to finally close the distance, only stopping when she finally reached the front. She grasped the wooden gate and leaned on it, her body shaking and heaving from exhaustion. Akane grasped the front of her chest to steady her breathing. After a few seconds, she finally looked up and scanned the grounds beyond.

What she saw made her breath hitch on her throat once more.

There, sitting on the porch steps she so frequented, his form illuminated by the moonlight was the one man that made everything stop for her with just one simple smile.

'It sure took you a long time to come back.'

\* \* \*

><p>Akane felt frozen on her place, her mouth slightly parted with shock. She didn't know if her eyes were just playing tricks on her but he looked so real, so solid as he gave her his signature smile. He looked so calm and sure as he casually lounged on the porch steps, as if he did not just see her rushing like a madman just a moment ago.</p>

It's as if he was really waiting just for her.

'Well, come here then. You'll catch a cold if you keep standing there. Your clothes look too thin,' Souji cocked his head playfully and tapped the seat beside him. Akane only blinked a couple of times, her hand still clutching the gate for support. The familiarity of his lazy, almost arrogant form and knowing smile stirred an intense emotion within her that made her want to break down and run to him. In reality though, she didn't budge from her position. She was already busy enough trying to calm her heart which started drumming in her chest painfully once more.

Souji raised his eyebrows at her when she didn't move.

'You want me to go get you and carry you here?' he asked with a mischievous tone that sounded so familiar it sent her heart reeling even wildly. The visual image of him carrying her finally startled her from her reverie and she shook her head vigorously before slowly walking towards him. His eyes never left hers as hers never left his with every step she took. When she finally stopped in front of him, his face lit up with an emotion she knew she wouldn't be able to process at her present state even if she tried. They just stared at each other for a full minute, neither one nor the other wanting to break their silent connection.

'Youâ€|knew?' she finally whispered as she processed everything that was happening. Souji's smile widened at her question. He leaned back on his hands and looked at her intently.

'That you're leaving? Yes.'

She blinked at the casualness of his tone.

'H-how?'

He shrugged.

'I just knew.'

She stared at him, her mouth open a little. He laughed softly and shifted on his seat.

'Believe it or not, I know how to read you. Even for just a

little.'

Akane felt her heart squeeze at what he said. She felt pressure building behind her eyes as he continued looking at her with his green eyes. He looked so beautiful. So honest. For a moment, she felt overwhelmed seeing the side of him that he never let anyone else easily see.

'And youâ€|You waited for me,' she stated in a bewildered voice.

'Yes, I did,' he answered, his playful smile faltering a little to turn into an earnest one. It was all she can do not to rush to him and cry on his arms the way she did when they were in the manor. She clenched her fists together to stop herself from doing anything stupid.

'Why?'

'What why?'

'Why did you wait?'

'Why shouldn't I wait?'

Words died in her throat and she closed her mouth. There were a lot of things that she wanted to say and ask but right now, she can't even manage to piece together a proper sentence. After a few moments, she tried once more.

'I could not have returned,' she stated, her voice stronger as she stared at him defiantly. Somehow, she felt the urge to make him realize the weight of her actions. It was true. She could have left. Never to return, never to see him again.

'But you did. You came back.'

Akane gritted her teeth at his tone. She suddenly felt angry at herself for even trying to leave and at him for letting her go in the first place and giving her the choice to never come back if she really wanted to. His voice, smile, and eyes were laced with something that filled her with guilt. There was happiness on them, confidence, relief.

And trust.

'How did you know?' she gasped out, her voice in the brink of cracking from the tears she's desperately trying to hold back. 'There was a huge chance I'll leave all of you. I could have left and none of you will be there to stop me.'

For a moment, the smile left Souji's lips and he just stared deep into her eyes. He looked like he was trying to grasp the right words to say himself. Then he moved his body forward, rested his elbows on his knees and clasped his hands loosely together. There was an expression of solemnity on his face that made her swallow the lump lodged on her dry throat.

'You don't need anyone to stop you, Akane. You didn't want to go back because I knew and you knew that there's a part of you that can't

leave this place behind. I've seen you scared, angry, and lost during most of your stay here. But I've also seen you happy. And somehow, I know that you're the type of person who holds on to happiness no matter how small or rare it is.'

At his words, Akane felt something come undone inside of her. That's just it, she thought. His words was all it took for her tears to finally start falling unceasingly. She didn't know how he does it. How he can make her cry in just a snap. She mentally chastised herself for the deluge of emotions that suddenly flooded her and tried get a grip of herself. Amidst her inner struggle, there was one thing that was repeating again and again in her mind.

\_He waited. For me. \_

\_He actually waited for me.\_

'Curse you, you sadistic monster,' she shifted her face away from him and wiped her tears away frustratingly with her hand. She didn't need to look at him to feel him smile at her.

'And shame on you for actually trying to leave, kitten.'

She choked back a laugh.

'Well, I'm here. I'm stupid enough to go back,' she said and roamed her eyes over the familiar structure of the headquarters, wanting to look at anywhere else but him.

'As I'm stupid enough to wait for you,' Souji mumbled, his voice light but still tinted with seriousness. Akane couldn't help but finally look at him, at a loss for something to say. After a moment, she spoke up.

'Because you just knew I'd return, right?' she whispered.

He smiled at her.

'Yes. Because I just knew.'

Akane couldn't help but blush. Like someone who has been out in the cold for so long, she suddenly felt the relief of finding her first fire. Warmth settled over her body like blanket, reassuring and comforting. Up until now, she still couldn't believe that this man she hated before would be the one to change everything about her. She still couldn't wrap her head around the fact that this man who used to annoy her all the time is now the man she loves.

Silence stretched between them but it was never like those uncomfortable lulls they shared before. This one felt calm, peaceful. They just relished on the unspoken words that hung in the air between, warm, welcoming, and full of meaning.

After a moment, Akane's lips quirked at the corners, her eyes communicating everything she wanted to him to know silently. There was just one word she knew she needed to say to him.

'Tadaima.'

As if in slow motion, she watched him smile back at her, his posture

relaxing. Souji looked at her with his clear green eyes in such a way that told her he understood everything she wanted to tell him.

'Okairi,' he answered back, his voice reassuring and warm against the cold night air.

She smiled.

Yes. Everything was fine.

\_She is home at last. \_

## 21. Chapter 20: From Fear to Love

A/N: I am so SORRY for only posting this now. I know, I know, I can't keep my promises properly lately but here it is. Just a little warning, there are some scenes in this chapter that are a little brutal so please read with caution. Well then, enjoy!

\* \* \*

><p>Akane squinted her eyes a little at the familiar sound of stretching string as she nocked an arrow to her bow. She focused all of her attention at the small wooden shack a couple of meters away from her and strained her ears for any suspicious sound that may come from the dense forest behind her. She flexed her fingers over the swell of her arrow and waited.</p>

'Are you ready?'

She started a little as she felt warm air graze her cheeks and the shell of her ear. Souji was leaning close to her, his eyes also trained ahead. The two of them, together with Harada and Shinpachi, were currently bent low behind a low shrub at the side of the house. Their hiding place was not that big to fit all of them and they were all cramped together in awkward positions. Heat crawled to her face as she felt another rush of warm air fan her hair as he breathed beside her. Without removing her eyes from the structure, Akane nodded her head once.

'We need him alive.'

'Hai.'

It has been a week ever since that fateful night when she saw him waiting for her at the headquarters' porch. It was also the same amount of time that she realized her feelings for him. To say that the days that went by weren't easy would be an understatement. Well, at least for her. If possible, her realization made things even harder as she found herself struggling to rein her emotions every time she saw or even thought of him. Not that she could blame herself. It was her first time feeling that way after all. For Akane, the emotion was strange, unfamiliar, and scary. She spent the past few days trying to get accustomed to it like a man feeling in the darkness. She didn't know what to do next or how to deal with things.

There was only one thing that she was sure about her new predicament

though.

\_Running away from him is fruitless. \_

And so she spent every waking hour dealing with him head on.

He never mentioned anything about her attempted escape to anyone. The morning after their conversation at the porch steps, he teased and annoyed her just like old times. As for her, she tried her best to match his playful antics with her usual infuriated responses. To anyone watching, nothing have changed between them. They were still the pair that got into each other's nerves even without trying. Of course she knew better though. Because once they were safe and away from the eyes of the others, the two of them fell into a comfortable silent connection much like the one they shared when they talked the night she chose to stay.

Akane briefly reviewed the events earlier that morning as she struggled to quell the frantic beating of her heart at his closeness. It was early morning and she was just heading out for breakfast when Gen-san suddenly told her that the vice-commander was asking for her at the meeting room. Confused, she headed straight to the chamber without any further question.

When she opened the door, she saw a bleary eyed Okita, Harada, and Shinpachi waiting inside. Only Hijikata seemed to be the one who was already in his senses. He was wearing an expression that she knew so well. It was the look he always have whenever he wants them to do something risky.

'I need you to go to Edo,' he said in a serious voice even before she can comfortably take her seat. 'We've received a report that one of the lieutenants of the Kageno Senshi Tachi have revived their base there and is continuing operations.'

All three captains suddenly perked up at the sound of the group's name. Akane merely stared at Hijikata, ice seeping through her veins. Fear immediately settled at the pit of her stomach at the same moment that scenes from the manor flashed before her eyes. From her peripheral vision, she also noticed Okita stiffen on his seat.

'We took care of their leader and benefactor. How is that possible?' he asked, his voice filled with deadly calm.

'It seemed like one of its high-ranking heads have taken control of the group and all its operations. According to our intelligence, they are planning to distribute the last batch of ochimizu sent there. It will be a huge problem for us if a rasetsu outbreak occurs in the province. We don't have much control over the place so we have to stop them as early as this time.'

'When do we need to go?' Harada asked, his face glum.

'Today.'

The four of them started on their seats.

'Now? Only the three of us?' Shinpachi interjected.

It took a while for Hijikata to answer. After a while, he looked at

her direction.

'Akane, do you think you can go?'

She stared at her vice-commander in surprise. Ever since that night when she was rescued from Ayato's lair, he gave her lesser and lesser responsibilities and work load. Her patrols with her division decreased and her indoor training increased. Not that she can blame him though. He was probably having trust issues about her with the number of times she flagrantly broke his orders.

'What? No! Why does she have to go?' Shinpachi exclaimed and looked at her as if he just noticed her sitting beside them.

'We have a presumption that the man leading the group was the one she served back in the ochiya when she spied for us,' Hijikata said, addressing the men before looking at her once more. 'You are the only one who knows his face.'

Akane closed her slightly gaping mouth and swallowed. A determined look clouded her features and she balled her fists over her lap before giving one tight nod.

'Of course. I'll go.'

At the corner of her eye, she saw Souji turn his head towards her. She briefly looked at him and slightly started at the look on his face. He was staring with a disapproving look on his eyes and there was something on the set of his lips that told her he was trying his best to stop himself from saying something. She quickly withdrew her gaze away from him.

Hijikata's sharp eyes did not fail to notice the brief and silent exchange between the two. He studied the young man sitting across from him a bit longer before finally turning to the girl once more.

'In one condition though,' he said as a realization hit him. Akane looked at him, not even surprised at all. She must be already used to him always giving her a catch. Not that she always followed him anyway. The girl was as hardheaded as him when he was her age which, for him, was saying something. Still though, he needed to do something this time about the situation. Not only for her. But for Souji as well.

'You are not allowed to fight. You'll just go there to identify the man. In case a battle presents itself, do not try to intervene. Our reports suggest that the target is alone as he is trying to keep a low profile so it shouldn't be hard for you to get yourself away from trouble,' he stared straight into her eyes with the most serious, scariest look he can afford. 'Fail to follow this and you'll be dismissed.'

Akane swallowed and nodded her head numbly. He looked deadly serious this time around.

'Hai,' she bowed.

There was a brief silence before he spoke again. When he did, she felt her eyes widen in surprise at what he said.

'Souji, I'll put you in charge of her this time. She'll be your responsibility.'

Akane's head shot up and she whipped around towards Okita just in time to see him also look up at her with a bewildered expression on his face. He just stared at her for a couple of seconds, a mildly shocked expression gracing his features. Then, his lips broke into his usual smirk.

'That would be a bother, but fine. Can't have you do something stupid again, right kitten?' he winked, already fully recovered from his initial astonishment.

She blushed and quickly turned around to face Hijikata, her complaints already ready in her tongue.

'No arguments. You've failed to follow orders for quite some time now. Take this as your chance to prove yourself again,' he interjected even before she can speak.

Her words quickly died in her throat at his tone. Her shoulders fell in defeat and she sighed before nodding weakly.

'Hai, fukuchou.'

\* \* \*

><p>'Someone's coming.'<p>

Akane was brought back to the present at the sound of Harada's low voice from her other side. Fully alert, she leaned closer towards the bush and squinted at the darkness. The house was as still as it was before and only the shifting ray of moonlight bathing its front yard showed any sign of life. All of a sudden, a slight movement from her far right suddenly caught her eyes. She immediately directed her bow at the direction and unconsciously held her breath. Beside her, she felt her companions stiffen in their positions.

After a few heartbeats, a dark figure stepped out from the shadows of the trees. He was wearing a long black coat with a hood that covered half of his face and he seemed to be holding a thin yellow roll of paper on his left hand. The person looked around to study his surroundings for a while as he tucked the parchment inside the pocket of his robe. Seeing that he is safe, he took quick steps towards the wooden shack. He slowly lowered his hood when he finally reached the spot bathed with a sliver of moonlight.

Akane's eyes narrowed.

'That's him,' she said, barely loud enough to be heard by the men beside her. The three looked at each other and exchanged nods. Beyond them, the man finally went inside the house.

'I'll take the left,' Harada murmured.

'I'll cover the right,' Shinpachi whispered.

'I'll stay here.'

She looked up in surprise at Okita's answer. He had on an intense expression that he only wears while on a mission. Her forehead creased a little in confusion as she tried to figure him out. He never seemed to be the type to stay back and take watch during an attack.

Souji seemed to have felt her eyes on him and he looked down on her. She raised her eyebrows at him in silent question but he merely answered with a brief shrug of his shoulders before looking away again. If she didn't know him enough, she would have thought that he's trying to avoid her eyes. But that's impossible.

\_He's Okita Souji after all. He never avoids anything,\_ she silently thought. \_Right. He's probably just anxious that I'll do something stupid again. After all, he might also lose a head when I don't follow orders since Hijikata put me under his responsibility.\_

\_But really? Can't the man trust me? \_

'I'll watch the entrance then,' she said. All three captains turned to look at her at once, causing her to stiffen slightly. She sighed. 'From afar,' she finally conceded.

Harada briefly patted her head before turning towards Shinpachi. The two exchanged a quick look before disappearing in the darkness.

'How are we going to do this?' she finally asked the boy beside her in a soft whisper a minute after the two captains left.

'We can't fight him inside the house. It's too small. Our movements will be limited,' Okita said, his eyes still trained beyond.

'So we make him go out?'

'Yes.'

'How?'

He briefly looked at her before winking.

'Why don't you ask yourself?'

Akane blinked at him uncomprehendingly for a moment. Then, it finally hit her. Her eyes fell on the bow and arrow in her hands and she grinned. She raised the weapon again and stretched the string.

'Aim for the window,' he whispered beside her.

'As you wish, captain,' she murmured back and mentally counted for a few seconds before finally letting go. The string made a dull sound as she released it, the arrow whizzing straight into the window. She watched as it zipped between two strips of wood which barricaded the casement before finally disappearing inside the house.

She counted the seconds. On her seventh, she finally heard a clattering from inside. She knew there was no other exit that can lead outside from their brief investigation of the place earlier. He has no choice but to use the sole escape route available: the front door.

It wasn't long before the man finally came outside, his eyes wild. He was barely able to make a few steps out the door though when Harada and Shinpachi suddenly leaped from their shadowed hiding places and strangled him. In a fast blur of limbs, the captains were able to pin him face first into the ground. The man started cursing and struggling against the pair's grasps immediately but to no avail. From their position, Okita motioned at her before finally standing up from his crouch and walking towards the clearing. She followed him immediately.

Akane saw the eyes of the man bulge in surprise as he recognized her. She tried her best keeping her face impassive and stared blankly at him.

'I have back-up. I swear they'll kill you easily!' he grunted out, his face already red from both anger and exhaustion as he continued to struggle. Souji gave a brief laugh and supported the blunt edge of his sword over his shoulder.

'Really? With all the noise you are doing you'd think they should have come already,' he drawled.

'Where is the ochimizu?' Harada, who had the man's arm twisted behind his back hissed.

'I don't know!'

'Is it inside the house?' Shinpachi asked as if he never heard the first answer.

'I told you I don't know!'

Akane tried to hold back a wince as Harada twisted the arm he was holding higher over the captive's back. The man's voice rose into a shrill scream. Just when she thought he will finally break his bones, the red-haired captain stopped.

'Come on, we're not going to kill you,' Shinpachi said as he steadied his hold on the man's neck from behind. Akane knew that from that position, he can easily kill the man with just a flick of his wrist. The latter whimpered and mumbled a few more garbled phrases as he felt more pressure from the ones holding him. She didn't understand him but she caught words like 'never', 'dead', and 'fools'. When it seemed like he was not planning on saying anything with any plausible sense, Akane heard Okita give a weary sigh. He stepped forward and crouched in front of their captive.

'We can't guarantee though that you won't be in pain if you don't tell us anything,' he said in a voice that made goosebumps crawl all over her skin. He looked deadly under the light of the moon with his eyes as cold as ice. Below him, the man made a soft whimper as he touched the end of his sword near his throat.

'Again, where is the ochimizu? We know you didn't distribute them yet.'

'I-I don't know!' sweat trickled from the captive's face and fell in large drops to the ground. The blade of the sword held against his chin pushed deeper into his skin and a thin trail of blood flowed from the shallow cut.

'You know we can do this all night, right?' Souji asked in a neutral voice as he slowly dug the blade more. The man stopped struggling out of fear of lodging the sword deeper. He was shaking and he set his jaw to bite back a scream. Akane swallowed as the blade continued its slow advance. More and more blood is now pooling to the ground and the man looked ready to faint. From above the captive, Harada and Shinpachi exchanged a tense look. Hijikata pointed out that he wanted the man alive. If Okita continues, they will end up killing him. If they stop though, it'll be a sign of weakness for them. And they can't let the captive see how important his capture is.

Akane tightened her grasp around the wooden bow and gritted her teeth. Anytime now and she knew the blade will finally hit a major vein that will end up killing their hostage. Her heart started pounding heavily against her chest and her palms had gone sweaty. Beside her, Okita remained calm, his expression still stoic as he continued pushing the sharp point of his weapon.

Five seconds passed.

Seven.

Nine.

Twelve.

'Stop! It's in the house! At the crate by the sink! All the bottles are there!'

Souji narrowed his eyes.

'How many bottles exactly?'

'A hundred and fifty!'

He quickly withdrew his sword and stood up.

'Akane, check the house and get the ochimizu. Make sure they're complete,' he told her without taking his eyes off the man who is now slightly gagging from the wound he received. She tried her best not to stare at the red stain on the soil and pushed down the queasy feeling that settled on the pit of her stomach as she continued hearing the gurgling noises. Not wanting to see another second of the scene, she nodded at the boy beside her and dashed inside the house.

She found what she was looking for at the far back of the space below the sink, hidden behind a couple of other empty boxes containing what seemed to be ceramic bowls and a few preserved packs of food. She peered at the small nook, willing her eyes to finally adjust to the darkness before reaching out inside. She was able to produce three medium sized wooden crates filled with hay and clear crystal bottles. She lifted one and held it to the ray of moonlight coming from the narrow space of the window. The red liquid glistened under the light like blood.

She slowly set down the box on the sink and started counting. From outside, she can hear the muffled, desperate grunts of the man as her companions continued questioning him. He sounded so terrified and

helpless and she shivered involuntarily at the sound of his voice. In all her months with the Shinsengumi, this was the first time that she actually dealt with a human in a mission. All the other ones have involved rasetsus. She knew it's pointless and silly to still feel uncomfortable about such situations but she can't help the uneasiness crawling over her system like toxic fumes. It was just so different watching a real man bleed like that in front of her.

Akane bit her lip and willed herself to tune out the sounds that were coming from outside. The captains seemed to have moved on to interrogating the captive now. She can hear their low tones interspersed with more frantic replies from the man. Willing herself to concentrate, she focused on her counting and moved on to the second and third box. After recounting for a few more times, she lifted one crate up and moved towards the door. The boxes were filled to the brim and she took one careful step after the other to make sure she doesn't spill anything.

'I found three crates. There's 150 of the bottles.'

Her voice caught on her throat when she looked up to fully address her companions. For a moment, she thought she was suddenly thrust into a nightmare at what she was seeing. Then the gravity of the scene finally struck her and she lost her grip on the wooden box she was holding. The crate fell with a resounding crash to the ground, spilling and crushing the bottles inside it with a faintly musical sound. The red liquid stained the soil like blood.

In front of her, Souji looked up at the sound and stared at her. There was a cold light in his eyes that made her shiver. Then, he slowly pulled his sword from the man's body with a sickening squelch.

The red coming from the now limp body merged eerily with the red liquid pooling at her feet.

\* \* \*

><p>'Sano-san?'<p>

'Hm?'

Silence.

'I'm sorry I dropped the box.'

Harada looked at the girl beside him in concern. Akane had been staring at the ground with a troubled expression on her face for almost over an hour now. He looked away before she even noticed him looking.

'It's okay. We are meant to throw the medicine away in the first place. You just made it a lot easier for us,' he said with a laugh, hoping to make the air lighter. Akane simply nodded, her eyes still trained at her feet. She has been internally berating herself for the past hour about the way she reacted earlier. She felt the red-haired captain's eyes on her but didn't dare look up.

'Sano-san,' she called out again.

'Yes?'

'Whyâ€|why did we get rid of him? I thought Hijikata-san said we need him alive.'

Harada did not immediately answer the question. Somehow, she felt as if he was counting on the chance that she wouldn't ask about it. They continued walking in silence for a while before she finally heard him sigh.

'He wasn't the man we were expecting him to be,' he said after a moment, causing her to look up at him in surprise. That was definitely not one of the answers she was expecting.

'What?'

'He just made it seem that he was one of the high-ranking officials of the group but he was really just a proxy for the real one who didn't make it to the meeting. The scur enjoyed playing the part of a man of position for once in his life and made you believe he is someone important,' Harada explained with a slightly frustrated frown on his face.

Akane's eyes widened at what she heard.

'What? You mean everything he told me was a lie?' she sputtered.

'No, no. All of those are facts. He was the attendant of the real lieutenant so he knows everything. He said Ayato didn't want the other faction they met that night to think that they weren't a solid group so he ordered him to take his master's place temporarily then.'

She stared at him open-mouthed.

'He said he was here because he was given orders to distribute the ochimizu by the one who took over the group.'

'Did he say who the new leader was?'

'No,' the tenth division captain said with a grim voice. 'He said he only communicated with him through letters and never saw his face even before. He was telling the truth. We found a parchment on his coat with the exact order from this secret lieutenant.'

'Unbelievable,' she whispered as she shook her head slowly. Here she was thinking she pulled a smart one on a man for once in her life but it turns out he was a con artist instead. Akane was in the middle of reviewing their conversation back in the ochiya when she suddenly remembered the real reason bothering her. She stilled for a moment before walking once more, feeling uneasy again.

'Is that why we got rid of him then?' she asked timidly before stealing a glance at the captain beside her. Sano suddenly looked at her at her question. He was looking as equally uncomfortable as her.

'Yes,' he answered after a while. 'There is no point keeping him

around. He'll just suffer more if we took him back to the headquarters.'

'Mmâ€|'

Harada looked at the girl a little worriedly. He scratched the back of his head awkwardly and looked away after a while. Comforting women was usually her forte so why is he feeling entirely useless beside her now? Not knowing what to do anymore, he finally came to a decision: Drop sugar coating and go for the direct kill instead. She doesn't seem like the type who wants half-assed truths anyway, he thought.

'You see, Akane, it's part of our job. Souji did what I or Shinpachi would have done if we were the ones in his position tonight. Even before we had the problem with the rasetsus, we've beenâ€|taking care of our enemies that way. I know it may seem brutal but it's just the way it is,' he said.

Akane nodded her head slowly. 'I understandâ€|I'm not questioning anything, Sano-san. It's just that, I hate the way I reacted. I should have been used to it by now, right? But no. I just stood there like an idiot and made a mess. I guess tonight was just different for me...' she said, frustration tainting her voice.

'Hmâ€|so that's what's been troubling you?'

She nodded.

He mulled over things for a while before suddenly chuckling. Akane looked at him as if he had gone crazy. Here he was thinking that she was unsettled by what she saw earlier when all along she was just brooding and berating herself for not acting cool about the situation. He didn't know whether to be amazed or troubled.

'Don't worry, we've all been there. It's normal to feel that when you first see a life being taken away by another. Heisuke was just like you before. Even when he was already a member of the group. Believe it or not, it took him a while to finally settle things with himself.'

Akane stared at him in disbelief. Heisuke? The Heisuke Todou who was always having competitions with Shinpachi for the most number of kills?

'Really?'

'Uh-huh. That rascal, it took him forever to finally come around,' Harada laughed good-naturedly. 'But on another note, if it were up to me, I wouldn't want you doing anything close to that. You're a girl. Not that I'm looking down on you, but men tend to have this instinct of shielding women from any form of trouble. It's in our nature,' he winked at her.

Akane couldn't help but smile.

'Well I guess I grew up differently,' she said, her heart already feeling light.

'You did, didn't you? But seriously, you have to be easy on yourself

sometimes. You're always pushing yourself.'

'You think so?'

'Yeah. I guess that's why Hijikata-san is so frustrated over you. You're much like him,' he said with a smirk on his face.

Akane laughed. The events earlier still dragged her a little but most of the weight has already left her chest. She did a mental note to make it up to her friend. Expect him to always know the right words to say at the right time. Deciding to shift her attention to other things, she now looked around her and drank in the surroundings. Edo. Old Tokyo. She was actually walking the streets of her real hometown. She didn't know if she should feel nostalgic or troubled at the strange twist of situation.

She was staring at a man selling location inspired trinkets when she suddenly realized something.

Why aren't we heading home yet?

'Sano-san? Where are we going?' she asked as she watched the people bustle around her. It was an hour or two till midnight but the road was still alive with peddlers and those looking for a nice place to drink and unwind.

'Oh, we're going drinking.'

She looked at him in confusion.

'Drinking? At this hour? But how are we going home?' she voiced out as a mental image of a groggy Harada and Shinpachi flashed in her mind. She definitely doesn't want to deal with that on their journey back.

Harada grinned at her before answering. 'We're staying the night here. Souji suggested it since it's late anyway. Plus, we didn't need to bring anyone with us so we'll just use all our free time enjoying ourselves. Good idea, don't you think?'

She only blinked at him in confusion. Finally, he wrapped his hand around her wrist and gently tugged her into the crowd. She gave a soft gasp as she tried to maintain her balance.

'Come on, Souji and Shinpachi are way ahead of us now. Every minute is precious. Oh, this is definitely going to be a great night,' he smirked at her before pulling her forward once more.

\* \* \*

><p>'No, I will not let you sleep with her, Shinpachi!'<p>

'Come on, why don't we just settle this through stick picking? The one with the longest one gets to share a room with her.'

'Or why don't we just cram ourselves together in one room and let her keep the other one herself?'

'Have you seen the size of this room, Sano?! Oh yeah sure we can sleep here. If you are willing to have the three of us lie on top of

each other!'

Akane winced as Harada and Shinpachi continued their shouting match. They were currently in a small room barely big enough for all of them especially with the height of the men with her. She was lodged between Souji and the wall, her arm directly pressed against his own. She can feel the heat coming from his body and the rising and falling of his chest. Akane felt herself blush and immediately chastised herself for becoming suddenly conscious despite of their current situation. Right now, what they needed was to find a solution to their problem.

'This is your fault for not doing the reservation properly!' Harada shouted at Shinpachi who was looking equally frustrated at his red-haired friend.

'It is not my fault that the people here made a mistake about the rooms!' the second division captain growled back defiantly.

'Then we share a room and let Akane have the other one. Either way, I will not let you sleep with her,' Harada hissed, his face only inches away from the other man.

'Who are you, her father?'

'No, I'm someone who doesn't want to sexually harass her every chance I get.'

'You really think I will do that to her?!" Shinpachi shouted back, his ears red. All of sudden, his eyes changed and he clapped his left fist to the palm of his right hand in realization. 'Aha! You just don't want me sleeping there because you want to be the one in that room,' he said with impish triumph.

She choked.

'What?!"

'Umm, do you want me to go out so you can talk about it?' Akane asked sheepishly, calling the attention of the two to remind them that she's in the room. The conversation was starting to go to topics she didn't want to hear about and she wanted to make a quick escape before that happens.

'No. You stay there. It's dangerous outside,' the pair said sternly at the same time before turning to each other once more.

'You can't share the room with her. You're the biggest among the three of us. Be reasonable, Sano.'

'If height is an issue, then why don't we just let Souji share it with her instead? Look at how thick your body is. You'll crush her!'

'I'm not thick, I'm muscular!'

At the mention of his name, Akane suddenly looked up at the man standing beside her. Okita, who hasn't said a word ever since the two started arguing, was currently watching the scene with a grim expression on his face. His hands were crossed across his chest and

there was a muscle twitching at his jaw.

'Don't mind them. They're drunk. Take the room and go now while they're still distracted,' he suddenly muttered to her, his eyes still trained at his two companions. Akane immediately tore her eyes away from him consciously. He must have known she's been staring at him.

'How about you then?'

'We'll just make do with this room.'

'You can't fit all here,' she said, her eyes roaming the space which is only wide enough to accommodate one single bed and a standing Shinpachi and Harada who were still shouting at each other's faces. Okita ripped his eyes off the scene and gave her a grin that made her blink at him for a couple of times.

'I'll drag one of them to the kitchen if there's no other choice.'

She gaped at him uncomprehendingly for a moment. Then she cleared her throat and looked away.

'Oh well, okay then. I'll be there. In the room. Good night,' Akane mumbled incoherently before maneuvering her body towards the door. In the middle of her turn, her slipper caught the leg of the bed and she stumbled, falling straight to the direction of the wall. A small gasp escaped her lips and she braced herself, ready for the impact when she suddenly realized she hit a warm surface instead. She immediately opened her eyes at the feel of the strange barrier against her body. A man's chest clad in a reddish brown and gray kimono met her gaze. She lifted her eyes slowly and found herself staring at a slightly smirking Souji.

'Feeling comfortable down there?' he asked lightly.

She squeaked and jumped away from him in a flash. Her face was burning and she can almost hear her heart thudding in her chest.

'Sorry,' she said in a voice more high-pitched than normal. She tried to bow in apology but only managed to bump her head against his chest instead. Akane winced in exasperation. Knowing that she'll embarrass herself even more if she tried doing anything else, she kept herself still for a couple of seconds before finally making her way carefully out of the room. Okita's body shook a little in silent laughter as he watched her tread the narrow space.

'Goodnight,' she finally mumbled before she went out the door. Then, without waiting for his answer, she dashed outside as if the demons from the nine circles of hell were after her.

Souji looked at the spot she disappeared to and snickered to himself.

'Goodnight kitten.'

\* \* \*

><p>Two hours later, Akane found herself teetering at the edge of sleep in her room. Her body felt as heavy as lead due to the long walk they had earlier to Edo. She silently thanked Okita for getting the idea of just staying the night after all. She didn't know if she can make it to Kyoto without falling on her face if they tried to walk back home.</p>

I sure hope they found a way to sleep comfortably tonight, she mused sleepily. That was her last thought before her eyelids fluttered shut and she finally gave in to her sleepiness.

\_Knock.\_

\_Knock. \_

\_Knock. Knock.\_

Akane suddenly opened her eyes again, fully alert once more. Who could be knocking at her room at this hour? She waited for the sound to come again just in case she was just dreaming about it. Sure enough, she heard another soft tap come from outside. She lithely got up from her bed and reached for her sword. Then she walked towards the door as silently as she could. When she reached it, she grasped the handle slowly and tightened her grip on the hilt of her sword. She took a deep breath and braced herself.

She threw the door open with all the force she had.

And found herself gaping in shock at what she found.

There, standing in the threshold was a disheveled looking Okita. His hair was out of its usual style and was ruffled as if he just rolled out of bed. His reddish brown robe was gone and he was only wearing the gray one he usually wore under it, its sash very loosely tied around his waist. He looked a little frustrated and nervous at the same time.

'O-Okita-san?' she stuttered, her eyes wide.

Okita stared back at her for a couple of seconds. There was an abashed expression on his face that would have made her smile if not for their current situation. He opened his mouth to try to say something but immediately closed it soundlessly afterwards. His eyebrows knit together in agitation as he continued staring at her. Finally, his discomfort got the best of him and he looked away, scowling instead at the wall beside her door.

Akane found herself frowning in return. She was just about to ask him what he was doing when he suddenly turned his head towards her once more, now with a determined look on his face. He sighed, cleared his throat, and looked straight into her eyes.

'Can I sleep with you tonight?'

## 22. Chapter 21: The Crossing of Paths

A/N: And...after almost three weeks, I am finally back! Sorry if updates are really rare. My schedule's been crazy. Anyway, here's a

chapter for you. Just want to let you know that I haven't abandoned this story yet. Times are just a little hard for me now and squeezing this in my schedule has been really hard. I had to do something though because last last night I just dreamt of Souji and Saito running towards me. I. Am. Not. Even. Kidding. It's like they've literally threatened me to continue writing. So here it is. Oh, and I added a little extra at the end. A little peace offering to those who've waited a long time. Thank you for all your support and I hope you enjoy this chapter!

\* \* \*

><p>A strong gust of wind rattled the wooden shutters of the window. From somewhere beyond the yard, a lark gave a cry that added a beautiful swell to the buzzing song of the cicadas. If it would have been any other situation, Akane would have gladly reveled in the sound. Instead, she is now gaping in shock, oblivious of everything that's going on around her.</p>

'I'm sorry?' she whispered in a voice that sounded like a cross between a squeak and a gasp as she stared dumbfounded at the young man before her. In the dimness of the hallway, she saw Souji wince a little in discomfort and revert his eyes once more to the wall beside her door. He seemed to be resisting the urge to take a step back.

'Can I? Can we sleep together?' he repeated, his voice sounding as equally uncertain now as her.

She didn't know it was still possible but she found herself gaping even more at him. Rephrasing the question that way didn't really help.

'Why?' Akane asked in a slightly scandalized tone. She couldn't help it. Her head just couldn't absorb what he's trying to ask. She was concentrating too much in the act of making herself understand that it barely registered to her how his face burned red in awkwardness and discomfort.

'Because those two kept kicking me even when I was already sleeping at the floor. Sano's legs are so long it won't fit on the bed and Nagakura-san's snoring is so loud I can't even hear my own thoughts,' he said through gritted teeth and frustratedly ran a hand through his tousled hair. 'I tried hurling one of them outside but I didn't know they can be so brutal when sleeping so I tried sleeping at the kitchen instead. The old mongrel of a cook threatened to throw me out though so I have no choice but to come here.'

At his words, Akane found herself blinking uncomprehendingly at him. She has already braced herself in hearing a variety of reasons but she never expected anything that involved Harada and Shinpachi. It took her almost a whole minute to finally realize what he meant. When she finally did, she couldn't help but slap a hand to her forehead.

'So you mean you want to sleep with me in this room?' she asked, putting emphasis on the words 'with', and 'room'.

Okita looked at her weirdly though his cheeks were still noticeably flushed. He only nodded his head and cleared his throat.

She couldn't help but stutter a relieved and abrupt laugh that earned her another strange look from him.

'Oh, so that's what you meant,' she whispered and shook her head amusedly at her own stupidity.

\_Stupid Akane. Really, what were you expecting? \_

He frowned at her in confusion. 'What do you mean that's what I meant? What else could Iâ€" all of a sudden, he abruptly stopped and stared at her open-mouthed. She stared at him in return then suddenly gasped as she read the expression of realization that flashed in his eyes. Barely a second after, it was immediately replaced by a mischievous look she knew so well.

'Are you thinking lewd thoughts?' he asked in a teasing voice that made her flinch. She opened her mouth to say something but found her voice stuck in her throat so she just settled on shaking her head vigorously. It was now her turn to burn an embarrassing shade of red out of guilt.

He cocked his eyebrow and gave her a full-blown devilish smirk that nearly caused her to stumble back. Souji took a step closer, placed his hand on the doorframe beside her head in a lazy, languid movement and leaned closer to her. All traces of his embarrassment earlier were gone from his manner as he studied her with a teasing look in his eyes.

'You are thinking of bad thoughts, aren't you?'

She swallowed the lump in her throat noisily.

'O-Of course not. Why would Iâ€" before she can even finish her pitiful stutter, she choked over her own voice as he moved even closer, his hair nearly grazing her cheek.

'Well, I didn't really think you'd be the type of girl, but if you want, I'd be more than willing to do it,' he whispered teasingly in her ear in a low voice she never heard him use before.

She swore she could have died right then and there.

And like the fool that she is, she only reacted to the situation the only way she knows how. Before even thinking of what she was doing, her feet connected with his shin and she pushed him back to the hallway by closing the door with all the force she had. Akane heard him give a small sound of surprise as he fell back to the dark hallway. Before she can even fully shut the door, however, he threw his hand between the small gap and pushed her back.

'Idiot! Go back to where you belong!' she semi-screeched, semi-cried as she threw all her weight against the wooden plank in an effort to close it. 'You idiot, perverted, sadist!'

'Hey, hey! Ouch! Don't close it! I mean it! I need your room!' he said from the other side with a voice that was more amused than desperate. She can almost hear him laughing and she bristled even more at it.

'No!'

'Come on, kitten. I was just joking,' he cooed.

'Who're you trying to fool?! Go sleep in the hallway or something,' she shot back.

'I'm serious.'

Akane suddenly stopped in the middle of giving another desperate push when he spoke again. She blinked then cursed herself silently at the way she reacts at the slightest sign of plea in his voice.

'Please?' he asked again, his tone now rid of any amusement or teasing.

She scowled in the darkness and resisted the urge to stomp her foot like a child in frustration.

Of all the people in the world why'd it have to be him? It would have been easier if I've fallen in love with Hijikata or even Kondou-san.

After almost a full minute of praying and calling out to all her ancestors for strength, she finally opened the door an inch wider and peeked outside. He was still standing there, his hands now folded behind his back in an effort to show her he's harmless. She glared at him. He only smiled at her innocently. After another full ten seconds of staring him down, she finally sighed and fully opened the door. Without another glance, she turned around and walked towards the bed once more. She just heard him take a few steps inside when she whipped around again and pointed a finger at him.

'Try anything and I swear you'll be the last Okita in the history of Japan,' she threatened through squinted eyes.

He stared back at her with an expression that looked more amused than scared.

'I think putting an end to my ability to create descendants will affect you more badly than positively in the future, but okay.'

All the blood in her body rushed to her cheeks at that remark and she nearly choked to death.

Before she embarrassed herself more, she turned around and closed the distance between her and the bed. The last thought Akane had in her mind before she collapsed on it again is if there will ever come a time when she'll be able to wipe that arrogant, confident smirk on his perfect, handsome face.

\* \* \*

><p><em>This is a bad idea.</em>

\_This is a really, really bad idea. \_

Akane couldn't help but flinch as she heard Souji shift on the floor once more. She didn't know how much time had passed already ever since she let him in. All she knew was that the muscles of her body

felt sore due to her uncontrollable stiffening every time she heard him move on the floor just beside her. She was on her side with her back against him, her head covered by the thin blanket she had thrown unceremoniously over her head the moment she collapsed on the bed.

Without exactly meaning to, memories from last week flooded her mind once more. As if she was reliving the moment again, she felt her heart thudding in her chest exactly the way it did that night when she ran as fast as she could back to him. Akane sighed softly. She knew it will take a while, if not forever, to finally forget about that day.

Not that she wanted to anyway. Because for all the discomfort and embarrassment she experienced since then, she was not sorry that she finally came to terms with her feelings.

Even under the cover of her blanket, she suddenly felt conscious of the way blood rushed to her head in embarrassment. No one can really blame her though, she thought. Barely a few days after realizing her feelings for him, she was thrown in a small, stuffy room with him.

I have the best luck in the world, she thought to herself ruefully.

Her train of thought was suddenly interrupted when she heard him shift again on the floor. After much contemplation, she turned around a little and pulled the blanket a little from her face just enough to take a peek at him. He was lying still on his side facing away from her, his hair splayed over the extra pillow she threw at him earlier. His body was bent a little in an effort to squeeze his legs underneath the spare blanket she gave him which was too small for his height.

Suddenly, a small gust of wind from outside blew gently inside the room through the closed wooden window. It felt refreshing and gentle for her. Her eyes still on him, however, she started at how he shivered a little in his position.

Worry overcame her in an instant, causing her to pull the blanket entirely away from her body. Akane stared harder at Souji's form, waiting to see if he really was cold or if his movements were just a result of her imagination. When wind blew inside their room again and she saw him slightly shake once more, she heard her own, timid voice calling across the room without really realizing what she was doing.

'Okita-san?'

Akane clapped her hand to her mouth at what she did. She eyed him anxiously, worried that she had disturbed him. After a while, she sighed in relief when she didn't get any answer from him. Deciding that she'll just put the outer robe she wore earlier over him, she started moving out of her bed as silently as she could.

'Yes, kitten?'

She froze.

'I didn't know you're still awake. Sorry, did I disturb you?' she asked worriedly after she finally recovered from her shock.

He turned over and looked at her. There was not a hint of sleep on his green eyes.

'No. I can't sleep. Why did you call?' his eyes skimmed over her form with a hint of concern. 'Do you feel cold?'

She nearly laughed at the coincidence.

'No. I was actually thinking you were the one who felt cold. I saw you shivering,' she said timidly.

An emotion crossed his eyes at what she said but it was gone before she can catch it.

'No. I'm fine,' he said after a while with a hint of a smile on his lips.

'Are you sure?'

'Sure.'

'Take my coat anyway,' she said as she pulled the robe from the foot of her bed and offered it to him. He looked at it for a moment in shock before his lips finally broke into a full-blown smile.

'Thanks,' he said and reached out for it. Suddenly conscious of his reaction, Akane laid down on her bed once more and rolled to her side to face the wall again after muttering a garbled goodnight. A few seconds passed before she finally heard him shift again on the floor with the rustle of cloth following his movements. She smiled to herself. Somehow, it made her feel warm that something of hers is keeping him more comfortable.

Silence fell between them once more. This time though, she felt like it was more stressed and punctuated than normal. She stared at the wall facing her, her eyes following the pattern of the brown wood.

'Kitten?'

She wasn't surprised at all when she heard him call out her name. He said it so softly that she was sure she wouldn't have caught it if she wasn't fully awake.

'Hm?'

Silence.

'â€|Did I scare you earlier?'

Akane stiffened at his question. So he did notice the way she looked at him earlier that evening when he finished off their target. For a moment, she found herself scrambling for the right words to say. Then suddenly, she realized that there is nothing else she can offer him but the truth.

'Yesâ€|a little,' she whispered back after a while. For a moment silence reigned the room again. If not for his still controlled breathing, she would have thought he had already fallen asleep.

'I'm sorry.'

Her eyes widened in surprise.

'For what?'

'For scaring you. It wasn't a part of the plan but the man proved to be useless so I did what I have to do.'

\_He'sâ€|explaining? \_

Shocked at what was happening, it took her a while to finally answer. When she did, she did it cautiously out of fear of saying the wrong words.

'I wasn't really scared. I was justâ€|shocked. I knew it was part of what we do. Sano-san already explained it to me earlier. You don't have to worry about it. I'm actually the one who should apologize,' she stopped and knit her eyebrows a little in frustration. 'For making a mess earlier and acting that way.'

He chuckled lightly at that. 'You don't have to apologize for feeling that way. I know not everyone has the same urges as me,' Akane heard him shift once more and figured that he was now facing her. She hummed in neutral acknowledgement to what he said, not really knowing how to answer him. She can feel his eyes on her back but it was not uncomfortable. In fact, it felt warm. As if he was touching her.

'Hey, Akane. What do you know about me?'

She moved her head to look at him out of the suddenness of his question. In an instant, thoughts started immediately running through her mind.

A child prodigy.

A kendo master.

Captain of the first division and assistant to the vice-commander.

One of the best swordsmen of his time.

Andâ€|

Taken by illness at an early age.

Akane stopped herself before she can even dwell at that last thought. The truth is that she knew far more about him than he would probably prefer but there is no way she can let him know that. As for that last disturbing piece of fact, she'll take care of it later on. She'd been playing around with a wild idea for some time now but she needed to talk to Hanae about it. There is simply just no way that she'll let him succumb to sickness.

Not when she's now there.

'I don't know much,' she finally said in a quiet voice.

'Do you know why I'm loyal to Kondou-san then?'

She stopped. She may know some information about him due to the Shinsengumi book she'd read numerous times but his history was actually a mystery to her.

'Iâ€¢|don't know.'

Okita chuckled softly and shifted on his back. Akane finally moved her body to face his direction and saw him staring at the ceiling with a melancholic expression on his face.

'When I was barely nine, my older sister left me to the Shieikan because she couldn't support me anymore. We lost our parents early. She already had a family and I was another mouth she can barely feed. I was actually left there to work at first but the older students picked on me. That wasn't the best period of my life. But that's when I met Kondou-san. I wasn't that aggressive back then and let the other kids do whatever they want but he was always there for me. He tried talking to the students who were bullying me but it just made things worse. I tried to push him away, told him bluntly to just leave me alone because everything is just getting bad as it already is but he never left me. He always helped me with my wounds. For months, I always stood outside the Shieikan's gate every sunset to wait for my sister to come back and he was always there to wait with me.'

'Finally, when things went overboard with the other students, I decided to take up the sword and accept the duel of one. He was fifteen. I was just turning ten. I didn't know anything about swordsmanship back then but I managed to get by. Somehow, I was able to beat him though I got bruised pretty badly. I can still remember Kondou-san yelling for me to stop the fight but I was stubborn to finish it. When it did, he immediately rushed to me and embraced meâ€¢|That's when I realized it. I didn't have much purpose in life when my sister abandoned me but he gave it to me again. He was the only person I had when I needed someone the most. He was my only family. So I knew that it will be for him that I will live in the future.'

Souji left his words hanging in the stillness of the room and Akane stared at him, utterly speechless. For the first time in her life, words entirely failed her. Not because she was in shock or nervous or scared but because she simply cannot imagine all the pain behind everything he said. He spoke so casually. There was even the slight hint of mild amusement in his voice as he retold his childhood. His eyes though, told a different story. There was a certain sadness and longing in them that she can't fathom or completely understand. Her attention refocused on him again when he suddenly sighed and placed his hands behind his head.

'So I decided that I'll be the sword of the Shinsengumi and of Kondou-san. I've placed all my efforts trying to help build the group with him and Hijikata-san. It was a good thing, finding a purpose. I can't do much but kill anyway. It's the only thing I'm good at.'

Her chest tightened and the burning sensation behind her eyelids heightened at what he said. Akane felt sad, happy, and scared at the same time. Sad that he had to go through such a difficult time in his life at such an early age, touched that he told her his story, and scared because of the way he looks at himself. She unconsciously started gritting her teeth together out of anxiety of what she just heard. It just wasn't right for her.

'Ah, sorry, did I bore you? I was just trying to help you sleâ€"'

'I don't think that's the only thing you're good at.'

Souji stopped in the middle of his sentence and stared at her.

'What?'

'Killing. I don't think that's the only thing you can do,' she repeated, her voice soft yet firm with conviction.

'Akaneâ€"'

'You should stop looking at yourself like that. You are more than just a killer. I have seen you with other people and you are not the demon you're claiming yourself to be. Seriously, you should stop thinking that way. I don't think Kondou-san will really like it when he hears that.'

He stared at her speechless as he processed her words. Even after a minute, he seemed to still not have gotten over his shock at her outburst.

'Don't punish yourself for something life gave you, Okita-san. You had a difficult one, I know. But you shouldn't base all your decisions for something that you clearly had no control over. I thinkâ€|I think that Kondou-san helped you before because he wanted you to continue living. And right now, you are not doing thatâ€|'

The two of them fell into silence. Souji still staggered at what he heard, Akane embarrassed a little for her outburst. She knew it wasn't her place to tell him those things. She didn't have to go through such pain in such a young age so she really didn't know what it feels like to be in his shoes. Somehow though, she felt like she understood him. And she wanted to change things. It just pains her so much to know about how little value he gives to himself. They just stared at each in silence, their eyes holding different meanings and emotions. Souji's green ones were startled and searching while hers were imploring and understanding. Like the night at the porch, they didn't dare break their silent connection.

'You think so?' he finally asked after a while. Akane can still see traces of shock on his face but it was now replaced by something else. She couldn't put her finger on it but it looked close to understanding. Realization. He was now looking at her as if it was the first time he ever clearly looked at her. She nodded her head.

'I know so.'

His lips slowly formed the most genuine smile he ever saw him give.

'So sure of yourself, kitten?' Okita whispered into the dimness of the room. His voice sounded teasing and light but in a way, she felt as if he was only doing it to lighten the mood. She can still see in his eyes the different emotion she sensed earlier.

'I have good reason to be,' she shot back confidently, not letting herself be left out.

His smile turned wider at that.

'Care to tell me why?' he asked in a challenging tone. Akane's eyes suddenly widened as she realized what she just said. The way he looked at her also didn't help. He was smirking at her in a manner that told her he knew something.

Something about her and some certain feelings.

She silently cursed herself.

'I believe I have already said way too much for tonight. I'm going to sleep!' she said in a rush and turned around to face the wall again. Behind her, she can hear him chuckling softly in amusement. There was a rustle of cloth as he adjusted on the floor.

'Goodnight then, kitten,' he whispered, his voice sounding closer than before.

'G-goodnight.'

'Oh, and Akane?'

'Yes?'

'Thank you.'

She found herself smiling at the wall.

'You're welcome,' she whispered back.

She had just closed her eyes when she heard him speak again.

'Oh, one more thing.'

'Hai?'

'When we arrive homeâ€œ I have something to tell you, okay?'

She suddenly opened her eyes in shock. She didn't know why but the way he spoke made her flush a dark crimson.

'S-Something?'

'Mm-hm. I think it's about time. I know we've both been waiting for it long enough already.'

Her heart stopped at his words and she found herself whipping her head to look at him. Unfortunately for her, his smile and the look in

his eyes only added into the disbelief and nervousness that suddenly flooded her veins. She must have gaped at him for a full minute, her cheeks embarrassingly red and her eyes wide.

'Tomorrow then. And don't even try to hide from me. The last time I said I need to tell you something you nearly left the headquarters. Don't pull something like that again, okay? You know I can find you wherever you go anyway.'

She opened her mouth then closed it again, grasping desperately for words.

'Goodnight, then,' he winked at her, his face clearly showing his amusement at how flabbergasted she is, before finally turning his back on her again.

Akane didn't know how long she continued staring at his back in shock. All she knew was that her heart had started thudding erratically in her chest. Amidst the shock, fear, and apprehension though, there was one thing that she sensed within her:

A tiny small bud of hope that opened just a little close to full bloom.

\* \* \*

><p>'Just four sticks please.'<p>

'Here you go.'

'Arigatou.'

Akane clutched the sticks of boiled sweet potatoes with two hands and stood on tiptoe to look for her companions in the dense crowd. It was early morning and she was tasked to go pick up some light breakfast before they finally start their journey back to Kyoto. She wove her way carefully through the busy street, looking for the three captains who were standing over a shop displaying some katanas just a few stalls away from her. When she finally reached the store, she knit her eyebrows in confusion when she saw its front empty. Sighing, she turned around to search the other direction when she heard a soft gasp and felt her body hit something. She closed her eyes just in time for her to fall flat on her backside with a soft sound of oof.

'Ouchâ€|ouch, ouch, ouch,' she muttered softly under her breath and opened one eye to assess the damage. Fortunately, nothing seemed inconvenienced except for the loose ribbon she had hurriedly wound around her hair that morning. Akane blinked as she felt some of her bangs fall lazily over her eyes as the ribbon lost its hold. She was just about to sweep them off away her face when she noticed that her hands were still occupied by the sticks of sweet potato she bought earlier. She sighed. At least their breakfast were secured.

'Ah! I am so sorry! Are you hurt? I am so so sorry!' a voice from above her said in panicky rush. Akane looked up to see the speaker but failed to get a good view of her with the hair shielding her eyes.

'Oh, no, I'm okay. I'm just, wait. I need to stand up,' she

momentarily struggled to stand from her awkward position on the street floor. With her hands holding their food, however, she only managed to wriggle helplessly on the ground.

She heard a soft chuckle from the girl in front of her.

'Here, let me help you with that,' the stranger said and she saw her offer a hand from the gaps between her bangs.

'Ah, thank you very much,' she said a little timidly before handing her the sticks of food. She pushed herself off the floor then, clapped the dirt away from her hands, and swept the hair off her face. When she finally had a good look at the person in front of her, she stopped.

The girl was around her age and had a slight figure, brown hair, and big amber eyes. Without her elevated geta sandals, Akane knew she'd be taller than her by about an inch. Her face looked young and innocent and she was smiling at her with a warm, friendly look.

The girl's appearance, however, was not the reason she felt herself rooted in the spot.

It was the odd, familiar feeling that suddenly invaded her senses.

'I'm really sorry I bumped you. I am such a klutz. Here you go. I hope you didn't get dirt on your food when you fell.'

Akane silently reached out for the sticks of food that the girl offered. She was still in the middle of figuring out what was happening when the brunette suddenly gasped and pointed at her hand.

'Oh! You're hurt!'

Blinking in confusion, she looked down and saw a thin red gash running the palm of her left hand. She stared at it for a couple of seconds uncomprehendingly, not entirely realizing that it was the wound the girl was talking about because of its smallness.

'Ah, this? No, it's okay. It's just a scratch,' she said with a smile afterwards.

'But it can get infected. Come, let's go there,' the young woman pointed towards a more secluded part of the street where the sign of a small odango shop glistened under the sun. 'I'll clean it for you.'

'But it's really okay.'

'Please? For compensation for bumping you so carelessly?'

Akane looked at the girl in confusion. She was staring at her with such big brown eyes that made her suddenly remember something. She just couldn't figure out what it is yet. Finally, she smiled. She decided it probably wouldn't hurt if she stayed for a while to figure out the off feeling she had.

'Okay then.'

\* \* \*

><p>'There, now it's all cleaned up.'<p>

Akane studied the palm of her hand now covered with a thin piece of gauze. Then she moved her gaze towards the other girl who is now smiling serenely as she put back all the cleaning equipment she used in the small cloth bag she had with her.

'Thanks. You did it so well. Are you a nurse?'

She chuckled good-naturedly at her question. 'Oh, no. I can't be a nurse even if I wanted to. But my father is a doctor.'

She froze in her seat.

'Aâ€|doctor?'

The girl hummed a yes and happily took two odango sticks from the shop's vendor. She offered one to her which she silently took.

'He's a Western doctor. He's really good at what he does. So somehow, some of his talents rubbed off on me. I can't do anything more than first-aid though,' she said sheepishly.

Akane swallowed the lump that suddenly got dislodged in her throat.

Could it be? Is there really a chance?\_

'Itâ€|it must be interesting. Being a daughter of a doctor. I've always wanted to be one myself,' she said softly, carefully weighing in her words.

'Mmâ€|yes, it makes me feel proud that I'm the child of one,' the girl stopped as something glistened in her eyes. She recognized it as sadness. 'Sometimes though, I can't help but feel sad. My father's so committed in his work that sometimes he leaves for his job. I know it's a little selfish for me but you can't stop a daughter from missing her family, right?'

It took her a while to answer as she suddenly felt her heart drum anxiously in her chest.

'I guess. Where is he right now? Your father?'

'Oh, he's in Kyoto. He had to do something for a while there.'

It took her everything in her power not to gasp.

'Ah! I'm sorry for being rude, here I am talking about my life when I haven't even asked for your name yet,' the girl clapped her hands in surprise. Akane cleared her throat and forced her voice out. She felt relieved that it didn't come out as rough and weak as she expected.

'Akaneâ€|I'mâ€|Akane.'

'That's a beautiful name. It's nice to meet you, Akane. I'm

Chizuru.'

\* \* \*

><p>She didn't know how she managed it but somehow, Chizuru wasn't able to notice the thunderstruck expression that she clearly felt her face register in that instant. The girl suddenly went on about how great the odango was in the shop they are currently on, oblivious of the fact that inside her, there were a rumble of emotions taking over her wave per wave.</p>

\_She's here.\_

\_My ancestor. She's actually here.\_

\_And I'm talking to her.\_

\_The one I've read about for numerous times. The one person my mother always told me about.\_

\_Wait. Okita-san and the others. They are also here. They're probably looking for me right now.\_

\_What if they meet? Are they even supposed to meet already? Or should I stop it?\_

'Akane?'

She started on her seat and felt herself blush when she noticed the other girl looking at her concernedly. From her expression, it seemed like she'd been waiting for an answer from her for a while already.

'I'mâ€¦ I'm s-sorry, I wasn't... I suddenly thought of something and-' she stuttered in panic.

She suddenly stopped when she heard her laughing.

'It's okay, I've probably bored you out. I've been talking on my own for a while now, right? I apologize. It's just thatâ€¦ I haven't talked to anyone my age for quite some time nowâ€¦'

She felt even worse at what she said.

'No! It's not that you've bored me. I just haveâ€"I was thinking of some other things!' she immediately supplied, put off by her own reaction to situation. 'I mean it, It's notâ€"' she tried to struggle for words, all the while inwardly cringing at how or why her intelligence decided to leave her at that moment. She must have looked extremely forlorn with the way the other girl looked at her a little worriedly.

'Ah, Akane-chan, it's okay. Really. You don't have to worry too much,' Chizuru held up a hand to her which immediately stopped her stutter. Akane felt her shoulders go lax.

'Gomenasai,' she whispered shyly. Beside her, the brunette just smiled and continued picking daintily at her food. She did the same afterwards.

'Anyway, where are you companions?'

Her head shot up in surprise.

'My companions? How did you know I wasn't alone?'

'Oh, I just figured from all those sweet potato sticks you were carrying. You don't look like someone who can finish all of them,' the girl said with a smile.

Akane stared at her for a moment before giving a short burst of laughter at her observation.

'Yes, I'm with three of my friends. We're just on our way back to Kyoto,' she finally said.

The girl's eyes widened at what she said.

'You're allowed to go out with your girl friends for such a long trip?'

She felt herself wince a little at the other's suggestion of her 'friends' gender but immediately went against correcting her. She figured the consequences will be a lot bigger if she told her about her companions being hims instead.

'We had some business here that we tended. Unfortunately, it wasn't really all fun for us.'

At that, she saw Chizuru's shoulders fall a little. 'Oh, I see,' she murmured. Then, her lips quirked again in a small smile. 'But it must be really nice to have such a number of friends.'

She found herself smiling earnestly at the comment.

'Yes, they are really wonderful people,' she muttered fondly and took a small bite off her odango.

'You look really happy.'

She looked up in curiosity.

'I do?'

'Hm-mm.'

She blushed. 'Umm... thank you, I guess?' she said shyly. In front of her, she watched as Chizuru finished the last piece of odango and daintily stood up. Up close, she marvelled at how feminine the girl looked. She always knew that she'd dressed like a boy in her years with the Shinsengumi so it was really quite a sight for her to see her in such an appearance. The kimono she was wearing now might not be an expensive one but Akane was still pretty certain that the young woman would have caught easily Hijikata's eye if ever he saw her now.

'Well then, Akane-chan. I have to get going. I have a letter to write back to my father,' she said, brushing off some crumbs off her clothes. 'If only I can, I would go with you right now to the capital just to see him. Unfortunately, i can't really do it now,' she smiled

a little sadly.

Akane also stood up from her seat. 'Thank you so much Chizuru-chan. For the treat and for cleaning my wound. And good luck with the letter. I know your father is...waiting for it right this very minute,' she said fondly before bowing her thanks. The girl easily returned her smile and bowed in return.

'Take care on your journey back.'

'Hai. You too.'

'I hope to see you again in the future. Sayonara.'

'Sayonara, Chizuru-chan.'

Akane watched the girl walk ahead to the other side of the street after giving her one last small wave. A feeling of mixed nostalgia and *deja vu* immediately overcame her as she stared after her leaving form. Who would have thought she would actually have a chance to meet one of her ancestors. It was weird for her and uplifting at the same time. She was so lost in her thoughts that she wasn't even able to stop herself from calling out the girl's name again.

'Chizuru-chan!'

The girl looked back at her in surprise.

'I just want to say that whatever it is you're feeling right now, you have to be strong,' she said softly despite of her surprise of her own words.\_ Because that won't be the worst thing you'll endure in your life\_, she added silently. In front of her, she saw Chizuru's eyes widen for a moment before her face finally settled into a happy smile.

'Hai|thank you very much, Akane-chan.'

She returned the smile and bowed again. In that moment, she felt the connection of the same blood and the same fate run between the distance between them.

'Your friends are very lucky to have you.'

She straightened up and felt her own lips tug into a small smile.

'In the future, I will surely introduce you to them. I'm sure you'll like them.'

Chizuru nodded and beamed at what she said. Then, with a final wave of her hand and a smile, she turned her back on her again and went her own way.

'Oi! Akane! There you are!'

Akane whipped around to see Okita, Harada, and Shinpachi waving at her from the other end of the street. She smiled at them and waved back.

'Where have you been? We've been looking all over the place,' Harada said good-naturedly as they finally reached her.

'Oh, I just took a quick look around,' she said sheepishly and moved her hair to the other side of her shoulder.

'What happened to your hand?' Okita suddenly asked as he caught sight of the bandage. Akane looked at it in surprise.

'Oh, this? Ahâ€œI got into a slight accident,' she laughed nervously and immediately hid it behind her back.

'Tsk. We leave you for 15 minutes and you managed to hurt yourself again,' he said in a teasing tone.

'Who were you talking to anyway? We saw you waving at someone,' Harada asked, staring off into the direction Chizuru went off to. Akane turned around in the same direction and saw her just before her form was swallowed by the throng of people at the other street. She smiled to herself.

'She'sâ€œthe one who cleaned my wound.'

'Ah! You met a girl and you didn't even introduce us to her!' Shinpachi exclaimed playfully beside her. Her secretive smile widened into a full grin. She reached out for the sticks of sweet potato lying on the plate the odango shop owner lent her earlier and handed one to each boy.

'Don't worry. I'm sure you'll have plenty of time to get to know her in the future.'

The three captains exchanged a bewildered look at what she said. Akane simply answered it with a chuckle and walked to the direction where they came from, tying her hair again into its usual ponytail. When she finally finished, she turned around to see the three still looking at her weirdly.

'So, shall we get going?'

Harada, Shinpachi, and Okita exchanged another quick glance before finally shrugging their shoulders. Then they followed her, ready to be on their way back home.

\* \* \*

><p>Akane sighed happily as she padded her way towards the meeting room. It was around afternoon and they were all tired to the bones with all the walking they had to do. Nevertheless, the four of them were still happy to have finally reached home. She watched and chuckled softly as Shinpachi finally broke into a run towards the group's conference chamber. She was just about to follow him and Harada who just turned around the corner when she suddenly heard her name from behind her.<p>

'Akane.'

She looked around to see Souji staring at her with a small, secretive smile on his lips. Despite of his grin, there was a hint of seriousness in his face that made her entirely stop.

'Yes?'

'Don't forget what I told you last night. Wait for me at the porch steps tonight,' he said lightly as he passed her in the corridor.

She immediately flushed and followed him with her gaze. She had almost entirely forgotten about what he said to her last night, figuring that he wasn't serious at all. She swallowed. He didn't look like he was even a bit kidding at all. After forcing herself to keep her emotions in check, she followed the rest of the party towards the room. She'll just think things through later.

'We're back!' Shinpachi exclaimed in his usual boisterous manner as he ripped open the door of the meeting room. 'You wouldn't believe what happened! We were-' he suddenly froze in the doorway just before he stepped inside the room.

'Oi, Shinpachi, move. You're blocking the way. Hey...what's going on?' Harada, who was just behind the second division captain also stopped in his tracks. Souji was just about to say something when he also stopped in the doorway, a frown on his face.

Akane who was at the tail of their group of four felt her forehead wrinkle in worry when she saw the three men freeze in their positions. With her height, she tried her best to peer at the scene inside amidst the bodies of the three. When she did find a gap, she only managed to caught sight of Heisuke who was sitting at the far end of the room.

The look on his face was all it took to also make her freeze in fear.

There was an expression on the boy's features that she'd never seem him wear before. He looked like a combination of scared, angry, and worried. He was also clutching a rumpled looking parchment in his left hand. As if in a trance, she watched him raise his troubled eyes to stare straight at her.

'Sakura. She's been taken away.'

\* \* \*

><p>Presenting...</p>

Hakuouki's Unbound by Time Outtakes Part 1: (Chizuru/Akane scene take 4)

Akane: I am so glad I've finally met you, Chizuru-chan.

Chizuru:(smiles) Ah, same here. I've heard so much about you, Akane-chan.

Akane: Me too. I've read everything about you. I even know your favorite hiding place with Hijikata-san back in the headquarters! Souji has told me lots of stories.

Chizuru: (clears throat and looks around uncomfortably)

Ah...Okita-san sure knows a lot about...things, eh?'

Akane: (nods head) He even told me about this one time when you and the vice commander blah...blah..blah...

(Harada, Shinpachi, & Okita watching the two not far away)

Harada: Oi, Souji, what have you been telling your girl?

Okita: (grins) nothing much. Just a few rumors here and there.

Shinpachi: Chizuru sure looks uncomfortable.

Harada: Akane's having the best time of her life though.

Okita: (smirks) She's Chizu's biggest fan. Wouldn't surprise me if she asks for her autograph.

Akane: (starry-eyed) Ah, Chizuru-chan, can you please sign this Shinsengumi book for me please? Please add a little heart at the end and a message if you can.

(Harada and Shinpachi sighs)

Harada: Didn't know she had it in her.

Shinpachi: Souji, get her under control.

Okita: Fu, fu, fu. ;)

### 23. Chapter 22: Red

A/N: Forgive me for the long chapter. I'm desperately fighting my mental block away.

\* \* \*

><p>'What do you mean she's been taken away?'<p>

'Kidnapped. Together with 20 other girls from this town.'

'Whaa"all of them together? How could that happen?'

'From what we can conclude, each and every girl was stalked and taken away within the last 24 hours. Sakura's parents said that they only asked her to buy some supplies around afternoon. She never made it back home.'

Silence fell over the people inside the room like dead weight. Akane stared at the floor in front of her, trying to digest everything she was hearing. She barely noticed the pairs of eyes glancing up at her and the boy sitting silently in the shadows of the room.

Heisuke.

'Do you have any suspects?' Harada asked in a low voice.

Silence.

'The Kageno Senshi Tachi.'

Her head snapped up at the name and she stared wild-eyed at Hijikata who just returned her look with a subdued expression in his eyes.

'The new commander who has taken control of the group seemed to be taking drastic measures to revive their operations. We thought they were focusing on Edo that's why we sent you there. From what you told us though, the man stationed there was only a dummy. It seemed like the real leader was here at Kyoto all along and made his move last night,' Sannan explained in a grave voice.

'But why kidnap girls? What sick reason do they have?'

'We don't know yet. But we can assume that they are planning to use the ochimizu one way or another.'

That was the final straw for Akane.

Something snapped inside her at the sound of the elixir's name and she found herself abruptly standing up from her seat, causing the others to glance at her in surprise. She balled her hands and kept them stiffly on her sides to hide their uncontrollable shaking. Her body was being wracked by the strong impulse to throw something and it was taking all of her restraint to even stand still without ripping the closest thing to her. When she spoke, she was even mildly surprised herself at how harsh her voice came out.

'When do we leave?' she asked, her eyes trained on the floor. When she did not hear any response, she moved her gaze up and looked at Kondou who was also watching her with a worried expression then Sannan. Finally, her eyes locked with HIjikata's.

'We have to do something,' she said, barely managing to keep herself from shouting.

'Akaneâ€'' Shinpachi slightly started towards her with a tone that was clearly supposed to soothe her but unfortunately only made her explode.

'I can't let her become a monster! I have to do something! Anything!' she shouted with a voice that made the second division captain fall back to his seat. Her eyes never left the vice-commander who continued staring at her with his solemn gaze. After a while, his eyes moved towards Heisuke's direction.

'We have a hunch about their whereabouts but it is not confirmed yet. We also don't have much information about what they are planning. We don't know what to expect. Going there will be practically suicide for us,' he said with a tone that made her shaking even worse. She gritted her teeth.

In that moment, she decided that she didn't care what the consequences of her next actions will be. She knew she won't have the patience nor the strength to sit back and wait another day when her friend is in grave danger. If her superiors decide that they have to

gather more information first, then there's no other option for her but to set foot on her own and save Sakura. She didn't have an inkling of idea on how she's planning to find her in the first place but doing anything, even something foolish, is still better than just sitting around waiting. Her decision was already so solidly formed in her mind that she was just about to storm out of the room when she was suddenly stopped by Hijikata's voice.

'We'll need time to search and visit various locations so move and ready yourselves now. We leave in three hours.'

Akane froze in her position in a mixture of relief and shock. From his corner in the room, Heisuke also looked up and stared at Hijikata with a surprised expression in his face. Suddenly, she realized that she wasn't the only soul there set to break rules in the event that their group decides to wait. And as she looked now at their vice-commander, she realized he had already figured that out too.

In the midst of the soft muttering and shuffling of the men around her, she couldn't help but give the man a relieved smile to which he answered with a small nod. Her emotions still tangled but her chest considerably lighter, she turned around to go make preparations herself. When she did, the little smile she was able to muster froze then bled out of her face.

Souji was leaning on the wall, staring at her with an intent expression. His eyes were laced with worry and there seemed to be a small frown just wanting to resurface from his calm exterior. They just stood there for a moment, staring at each other until finally, he broke the connection, turned his back on her, and walked out the room.

\* \* \*

><p>Those memories seemed to be a thousand years ago as she now stealthily stepped into the main room of an old abandoned temple with the other captains fanned out around her. With the information from some civilians that Yamazaki have scouted, they were lucky enough to pinpoint the new hideout of the group only after one failed try. The moment they reached the abandoned temple down south of town, their party did not wait long to infiltrate it. Everyone seemed to be eager to move, especially her. She now made her way into the darkness, her brown eyes studying every nook and cranny of the old structure. Beside her, she felt Okita also slightly shift positions after her.</p>

Despite of her obvious chagrin and the way he left her alone throughout the day, it did not escape her how he always seemed to be just within her reach ever since that brief group meeting. He never tried talking to her or even assure her that everything is going to be alright. No. He just watched her silently, his gaze following her every move. That continued as they finally set foot that afternoon. He was still always there, covering her back or just by her side one way or another. In a strange way, his silent companionship brought back some reason to her. It gave her the sanity she needed to not completely go out of control.

Heisuke, unfortunately, was not coping as easily as her. She was so used to him being boisterous and loud that she can't help but grow worried for him as he continued keeping to himself. He seemed to be

just simmering underneath, his usually clear blue eyes stormy and troubled. Even Harada and Shinpachi seemed to be wary to approach him. She watched over him worriedly now as he stepped ahead of the group and pulled out a large rock about the size of his fist from his pocket. Then, without any warning he threw it across the room.

All of them flinched at the resounding sound it made as it disappeared into the darkness.

'Oi, Heisuke. What are you doing?' Harada asked with a slightly concerned voice from her other side.

'We don't have time to look for them. Let them come to us,' he answered with a serious voice that sounded so uncharacteristic of him. Akane saw him pull out his sword then, its blade glinting in the soft light lent by the candles hanging on the banisters. She pursed her lips together at what he said. Then she also pulled out a bow from the quiver strapped tightly on her back and nocked it on her bow.

\_He's right. Let's get this over with. \_

From her side, she sensed Okita move and stare down at her in her peripheral vision. She kept her eyes steady at the darkness beyond and held her breath.

'You have a plan?'

She frowned a little at his question.

'Attack, save Sakura, go home, and have a good sleep,' she murmured under her breath.

He answered with a soft chuckle.

'Nice plan.'

'Thanks.'

'Akane.'

'Yes?'

'Look at me.'

She instinctively tore her eyes away from the space she was staring off to at the slight tone of demand in his voice. He was looking at her with the same expression that afternoon in the meeting room.

'Do not die, okay?'

Her eyes slightly widened at what he said and she opened her mouth to tell him to do the same. Before she can properly answer him though, she was interrupted by a cacophony of blood-curdling shrieks from somewhere in the building. Barely a breath later, their group was surrounded by a wall of men with white hair and red eyes.

\* \* \*

><p>Barely a few minutes since the battle erupted, Akane now found

herself at the doorway of a wide room, her chest heaving and eyes squinted as she struggled to adjust her vision in the darkness. Her arm was bleeding from the wound she got earlier when she hurriedly jumped off the banister she perched to get a good shooting position. She was halfway through her first quiver and was in the middle of shooting down a rasetsu that was about to jump on Saito when she suddenly heard a female voice ringing from the far depths of the temple. After planting her arrow in the middle of the monster's chest, she immediately broke into a run towards the direction of the scream.<p>

She now briefly looked back, wondering if any of the others made it as far as her. She wasn't surprised at all when she did not see anyone. The fighting was already intense in the main room when she left and each and every captain struggled to keep at bay the rasetsus who seemed to be fiercer and madder than any they have battled before. She turned back to face the room and braced herself. She would have to do this alone for now.

She now took a cautious step forward, her bow on the ready in her hands. From what she can see in the eerie light of the candles bathing the room, she was in a wide, expansive space sparsely littered here and there with massive brick structures. The air smelled of stale burnt bread and yeast and there were white shapes that looked like sacks lining the walls. She approached the closest brick structure to her and finally realized where she was.

An old, wide kitchen.

She pushed forward, keeping her eyes and ears peeled for any sound that may indicate where Sakura and the other girls were. After she ducked into what seemed like the hundredth brick oven, she finally picked up something. It was very soft and sounded like a cross between a sob and a gasp. Hiding in the structure, she peeked into the space beyond and found her eyes widening at the scene.

Sprawled carelessly in awkward positions on the floor were the bound girls. Some were sobbing while the others were carelessly squirming to get into more comfortable spots. Akane felt her stomach lurch and bile rose to her throat as she saw a familiar figure finally manage to sit up and lean heavily against the wall.

Sakura.

Her mind went blank at the situation she saw her friend in. In an instant, anger started flowing through her veins like poison and she found herself shaking once more. She was so out of it that she unconsciously took a careless step forward from her hiding place. Before she can even make another move though, a figure suddenly appeared from the side of the room. His face was angled away from her and he stopped just in front of the group with his back facing her. Akane snapped back to reality and immediately maneuvered her body back to the safety of the shadows. As she slinked back into the darkness, she saw a girl with flowing red hair in the far left of the clearing gape at her in shock. She froze in response, equally petrified. Then she heard the man's voice. She touched her index finger to her lips in a motion to silence her then pointed towards the speaker.

Don't let him know I'm here.\_

The redhead's eyes widened for a moment before finally giving her a small nod.

'I hope all of you are more comfortable now,' the man drawled in a tone that made the hairs at the back of her neck stand on end. 'I'm sure this time you all understand that anyone who tries to escape will be punished dearly,' he intoned maliciously, his eyes lazily drifting towards the very same girl that saw her. Akane flinched as she took a closer look at her. Bruises and cuts adorned her cheek and there seemed to be crusted blood on the side of her head. A fresh wave of anger washed over her as the possibility of things that could have caused those bruises flooded her mind. Then her eyes automatically snapped to Sakura. She heaved a sigh when she studied her. Her friend looked pale but she was definitely unharmed. In fact, she did not even look scared. She just stared at the man with a determined and fearless look on her face that she never saw her wear before.

Despite of the current predicament, Akane felt pride burst through her. She never figured Sakura to be the brave type so she couldn't help but feel better at how well she was holding up. There was a steadiness and strength that simmered just underneath the girl's bubbly, almost naïve exterior that made her realize she have underestimated her.

Unfortunately for her, that positive feeling was short-lived when she heard the man speak again.

'What are you looking at little bird? Do you want to be beaten to a pulp like the silly girl here?'

Fear immediately doused her whole being again as she watched the man approach Sakura in her corner. She immediately trained her bow at him, ready to release her arrow the moment that he touches her. From her position, she saw her friend's lips move as if she's whispering.

'What did you say?' the man asked once more as he finally closed the distance between him and her. Sakura fell back a little into the wall but the stubborn look in her eyes remained.

'I said I'm not afraid of you,' she said in a slightly louder voice.

Smack!

A soft growl was torn from her throat in surprise and loathing as the resounding sound of a slap reverberated across the room's wide space. She temporarily loosened her hold on her weapon in response to the leaping of her emotions to stop herself from prematurely hitting the man right then and there.

'You foolish girl. You still think someone will save you, huh? You are too brave for your sake. Too bad. I wouldn't mind correcting that,' he snickered crazily before roughly hoisting Sakura from the floor by her arm. Akane edged a little closer towards the clearing, her fingers terribly itching as she tried to find a good aim. She watched with loathing as Sakura was dragged harshly towards the front of the group of bound hostages then pushed towards the floor

unceremoniously again.

'What are you so proud of, git? Those guys who so carelessly attacked the base? Why don't you listen? What can you hear? Screaming, right? They're being massacred by my men! The very monsters that I will turn you into in a moment!'

She gasped at what she heard.

'You're wrong! They won't be defeated! They're coming! They're coming for you!'

Another slapping sound reverberated across the room.

'Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!' the man screeched in an unhinged voice. Finally, he fully turned his back on her as he took a handful of her friend's clothes.

Akane did not waste any more time.

She jumped from her position the same time that she released her string. Her arrow sliced the air and dug itself on the back of the man's neck in the speed of light, causing a few of the girls to scream and scramble desperately at the floor. Barely a heartbeat later, she had another arrow nocked ready on her bow. She rushed closer to the clearing where all the hostages were slumped, waiting for her target to fall down to the floor.

It did not come.

After a few more moments, the reality finally sunk into her.

He was not human.

This was confirmed when he slowly turned around to face her. Akane's eyes widened and her heart stopped beating in her chest as she came face to face with the very man that she shielded Okita from that day when she first met Ayato.

The man who drank her blood.

\* \* \*

><p>'Akane! Just run!'<p>

She gave a soft sound of oof when her body hit the clump of sacks of the far wall. She hit them so hard that the containers tore and released puffs of old smelling flour in the air. She coughed as it filled her nose and choked her. In the middle of the room, maniacal laughter came from the dozen or so rasetsus who were now stealthily walking towards her direction. Akane moaned in pain, pushed herself off from the floor, and positioned her sword in front of her once more. Blood dripped from a cut in her forehead and she blinked it furiously away as it came in contact with her eyes.

'Not going to give up yet? It's fine. My men here can easily use you as a snack. And then you'll cause more rasetsus like me to exist. Come on, just fight. You're actually doing us a favour.'

She gripped her sword tighter at what he said and tensed her body as

she eyed three furies edging closer and closer to her. She knew he was right. Ever since the band of rasetsus appeared to the man's rescue, the monsters haven't tried killing her. Instead, they merely slashed at her enough to cause wounds in her body. The current situation was not doing her any favour battle wise as well. She was already concentrating too much in dancing away from the monsters' grasps and keeping them from drinking her blood to properly attack them.

'Akane, please!'

'Shut up, girl.'

'Akane just leave-ack!'

'Stop hurting her!' she screamed at the top of her lungs as the man held her friend by the neck. Sakura's face instantly turned red at the pressure. She tried jumping at the bow that was inconveniently ripped away from her hands when she fell to the floor earlier but fell back when a rasetsu blocked her way. She cursed. She couldn't actually attack him without going through the band of monsters with only her sword.

In her chagrin, the man merely answered her frustrated cry with a cynical laugh. She watched with wild eyes as he tightened his grasp over her friend's neck even more, causing Sakura's face to almost turn green.

'You care way too much for people who don't matter, princess. It's just like what master had said.'

'Stop it!'

The man's red eyes narrowed and he smirked devilishly at her.

'Come get her.'

Finally stretched beyond any form of reasoning, Akane finally lurched forward, not minding if the furies jumped at her all at the same time like wild animals. She dodged one and drove the hilt of her sword on its stomach and swiped her blade over the torso of another who tried to hack at her arm. Claws slashed through the sleeve of her kimono and she felt briefly blinded by the pain as her flesh came contact with razor sharp nails. Akane spun around and ran her katana over the monster, conveniently catching it by the throat. She watched in half-horror, half relief as the rasetsu fell face first to the floor, twitching a little as thick blood rushed out of its wound. Not letting her guard down even for a second, she waved her sword at the others who tried jumping at her, conveniently keeping them at a safe distance for the moment. Behind her, she can hear the sick gurgling sounds of the monster she just slashed as it scrambled over the cut on its neck. She was just about to hurl herself forward once more when she suddenly realized the sudden change in her opponents.

As if somebody froze them in their positions, the rasetsus kept still in their positions around her, their red, quivering retinas the only sign signalling that they were still alive. Akane watched as the eyes of one of the men swivelled towards their fallen comrade on the floor who was still jerkily swimming in his own blood. She knitted her eyebrows. She finally understood what was happening when she saw the

nose of another rasetsu twitch as if sniffing the air.

She ducked and jumped out of the way just in time before the rasetsus dove straight into the man on the floor. She stumbled back and watched in horror as the white haired men attacked their fallen comrade like animals, causing blood to spray everywhere as they tried to hack at him. She stood transfixed on her spot and fought the urge to throw up as she listened to the ear-splitting cry of the man on the floor as he was devoured alive. Being a rasetsu, she knew that he cannot truly die unless he was lethally struck in any of his vital organs. And so he screamed and screamed as his flesh was continuously ripped then healed again.

'You fools! Stop that! Attack her! She is the target! Go get her!'

Akane whipped around and saw the man finally release Sakura who fell to the ground in a broken heap. She immediately took the window of opportunity and flung herself forward, her sword raised and ready. He was too engrossed on shouting at his supposed soldiers that it was almost too late for him to realize what was happening. Her blade barely missed his head as he jumped back to dodge her attack. Akane almost laughed at the expression she saw in his face. For the first time that night, his eyes showed fear. Fear for his life. And fear of her.

Before he can fully recover, she twisted her upper body and drove her sword again, this time targeting his heart. He fell back but not after she ran the blade across his shoulder. A huge, red welt suddenly appeared on his once pristine kimono. This time, she really did give a harsh bark of laughter.

'You bitch!'

She merely answered with another attack on his left side. This time though, he was finally able to come to his senses and block her sword with his arm. Her blade sliced through the flesh of his hand before he pushed her back on the floor. Fortunately for her, she was able to make a smooth fall and rolled back to her feet in an instant.

'You cannot defeat me! I am the strongest in this group!' he shouted at her in a booming voice that almost made the foundations of the old room quiver.

'You are just a monster. An anomaly. You are not invincible!' she shot back at him harshly as she moulded her body into another attack stance. His pupils dilated in anger at what she said and he glared at her for a moment. Then he suddenly started laughing like a maniac.

'I may be, yes. But it is not someone like you who can defeat me!' he roared before hurling himself at her. With his speed and strength, Akane barely managed to miss his hand from crushing her shoulder blade as she ducked out of his way. When he swung again, she met him with her blade. Blood sprouted from the wound in his arm as she plunged the metal into his flesh, causing him to roar in pain. Then she kicked him with all the strength she had and danced away from him. When she fell back, she accidentally toppled over a wooden box leaning on the wooden pole next to her. She jumped out of the way yet again as its contents started raining on her. When they hit the

floor, she found her eyes widening in surprise. They were glass vials filled with dark red liquid.

The ochimizu.

Despite of the roaring and howling of her opponent, she whipped around to study the other boxes surrounding her. She felt blood drain from her face as she saw rows and rows of stacked crates on the walls just over the white sacks she spied earlier.

'Don't you dare turn your back on me!'

Akane felt her scream of agony freeze in her throat as she felt splitting pain run over the whole of her back as he punched her body from behind. She collapsed face first into the floor, her sword clattering to the ground. Despite of the debilitating pain, she instantly rolled over and pulled her short sword from her waist. She had barely lifted it when the man drove his fist straight into her face. Then a sick crunching of bones filled her ears as her blade met with his knuckles.

'You cannot kill me! You are just a woman!' he said, spit flying from his mouth. His eyes were already unfocused and he was quivering like mad on top of her. 'I will cut your pretty head off your body and give it to my master!'

With all of her strength and concentration already focused in the blade keeping his fist from driving into her face, she failed to notice the other free hand that he slowly raised. When she finally realized what was happening, it was already too late. He had already taken hold of her neck and was squeezing her tightly. Akane's eyes bulged from the pressure and started watering in her effort to gasp for non-existent air. She can feel her face filling up with blood and she flailed her feet underneath him in an effort to push him away. It was useless though, with his strength, she started to feel energy slowly leave her body in an instant and her vision blur in the edges.

Seeing that she was near to losing consciousness, the man laughed at her and pulled his fist from her sword. Then he also wrapped his other bloodied hand around her throat, doubling the pressure in it.

'Die! Die! Die!'

Barely hanging on to consciousness, Akane tried closing her eyes as she finally and silently accepted the reality of what was happening. She knew she would barely last another minute so she stopped struggling, focused all that's left of her into angling her blade at the man's side. Then she said one last final prayer.

\_Please. Just let me do one last thing to save them.\_

With the last traces of her energy left in her system, she drove her sword straight into the man's ribs.

\* \* \*

><p>She opened her eyes again at the sudden rush of air that filled her lungs. She blinked, almost startled by how clear her vision

suddenly was. Her neck felt sore and raw and her chest was heaving violently from her lungs finally functioning again.<p>

'Argggh! '

Akane started at the sound close to her ears and turned her head briefly to the side. She still felt weak and a little disoriented. Then, as if she was doused with ice cold water, she snapped back to alertness as she saw the man who was just strangling her a couple of seconds ago flailing in pain beside her on the floor. Blood was rushing out of him like a river.

There was her sword still wedged in between his ribs and another blade sticking out of his stomach.

'Get out of the floor! '

She did not need to look up to see who gave the command or even questioned if the order was for her. She simply scrambled out of the way and pushed herself off the ground in a hurry. Then, as if someone turned the music on, she suddenly became aware of the human battle cries now reverberating across the room. That was when she confirmed it.

They have finally arrived.

'Get your sword and help Heisuke! '

Akane turned wildly at Okita who somehow managed to pin the rasetsu down on the floor. He was also half-drenched in blood and it seemed to be taking all of his strength to keep the monster down. She was just about to argue that he needed her help more when he suddenly looked up and shouted at her again.

'Hurry! We need to get the women out of here quickly! More rasetsus are coming! '

Horrified by what he said, she quickly pulled out her sword from the man's body and turned away from the scene as fast as she can. She scanned the room with wide eyes and drank in what was happening in front of her hurriedly. More rasetsus seemed to have arrived and the captains were fighting tooth and nail against. It took her a while to finally find Heisuke who was bent over the group of girls on the other side of the room. She ran to him immediately.

'Heisuke! '

'Akane! Help me untie the other ones! We need to get them out of here! More of them are coming! ' he said as he wedged his sword and dragged it to cut the thick rope tying one of the girl's arms.

'Where's Sakura?! '

'Already outside! There's a back door there! ' he shouted and hurriedly pointed at the small door at the far end of the room. She briefly looked at it before falling to her knees and helping him untie the women. When they finally finished, they did not waste a

second to usher everyone out. After the last one passed through the back door, they both stormed inside again.

'This is getting worse by the second,' Heisuke said through gritted teeth. She couldn't agree more. The number of rasetsus have obviously doubled and everyone seemed to be barely holding up. She scanned the room with her eyes and blanched when she finally saw what she was looking for.

Okita, together with Hijikata and Saito, were now taking on the rasetsu that nearly killed her earlier. Despite of their combined forces, the three were barely hurting their opponent who, even though already covered in blood seemed to have become even more rabid. Unwittingly, she heard Ayato's voice echo in her head.

\_Even though your little samurais hit all his vital organs beyond repair, he was still able to recover.\_

Her heart stopped as the sentence echoed again and again in her head.

'Heisuke! We need to help them!' she whipped around the boy beside her and pointed towards the three captains. The weight of things fell around her heavily and she felt her body suddenly consumed by helplessness and panic.

'Harada and Shinpachi needs more help! Harada was injured a while ago and can't properly use his spear. We have to go to him, come on!' he called back to her as he rushed forward towards the direction of his friends in the middle of the room. She grabbed him by the arm.

'No! That man! He's different! No matter how many times we hit him we won't be able to kill him! Unless we cut off his head!' she shouted.

'What? What are youâ€"'

'He'll heal no matter how many times we wound him! I know! Ayato told me before! They can't win this unless we help them! Please believe me!'

Heisuke froze in his spot and stared at her in shock at what she said. She pleaded at him with her eyes until finally she saw the fear clearly shown on her face also creep into his features.

'Shit! We have to do something!' he cursed before turning around and staring in horror at the man Okita and the others were still fighting.

'I'm going to get my bow! Just help them now! I can cover you properly with my arrows!' she hurriedly said before breaking into a run. She ducked over Shinpachi who was battling a particularly nasty looking rasetsu that was taller than him by a foot. The captain dug his sword into the monster's stomach with a sickening squelch. Finally, she skidded into a halt on the spot where she dropped her bow earlier and quickly grabbed the weapon from the floor before speeding straight to the area where Heisuke now joined the others. She nocked an arrow in the middle of her run and released one immediately. It hit the man on the stomach.

'Akane!'

'Cut his head off! We can't kill him unless we behead him!'

'What?!" Hijikata shouted in confusion.

'Just do it!'

She did not dare look back as she started climbing another banister just a few metres away from the furious fighting. When she finally reached the top, she hooked her legs on two adjacent wooden foundations and pulled her body up. Then she took target again and hit the man's throat from behind. Her arrow pass through his flesh and stuck out in his front.

For a moment, the four captains stopped in horror as they stood transfixated at the bizarre sight.

'Don't stop!'s he screeched from her position above. It was too late. She saw the rasetsu flash a maniacal grin and swung back at the men roughly, managing to catch Hijikata's leg and Souji's chest in the process. Then he grabbed Heisuke by the arm and threw him mercilessly at Saito.

Akane was so horrified she didn't even know who to call first. Before she can even figure out what to do next though, the monster have already turned and leered up at her.

'You dumb girl. You've been making things really really hard for me,' he sneered while pulling the arrow from his neck. Then he started approaching the banister she was perched on stealthily. When he reached it, he wrapped his arms around it and started shaking the thick wooden pole.

She bit back a shout of her own as she felt the wood she was perched on wobble dangerously. She didn't think it was possible but the man managed to destroy the foundation halfway through its core in mere seconds. She desperately struggled to find anything to grasp but found nothing but air. The next thing she knew, she was falling fifteen feet towards the ground.

The wind was effectively knocked out of her when she finally hit the floor. She fell directly into the sacks on the ground and winced in pain at the result of the impact.

She did not even have the liberty to fully recover from the pain before she heard another ominous sound disturb the room again. Then came Hijikata's hoarse orders.

'Everyone out of the room! NOW!'

She did not need to ask why as bits and pieces of wood started raining down on her from the ceiling. Akane watched in horror as she realized what happened. The man has destroyed the primary pillar holding the roof up.

And the room will crash down on them now any second.

'Akane! Let's go!'

She turned her head in a panic and saw Souji motioning to her from her far left. On his feet was the rasetsu who looked temporarily blacked out. Blood almost covered his whole head and there was a wide gash on his neck as if someone partially attempted to behead him. Akane did not dwell on the visual and pushed herself up. Then she suddenly stopped.

'Hurry!' Okita called to her again. He was just about to go to her when a huge slab of wood fell between them.

'I can't! I think I broke something!' she shouted as loud as she can with tears in her eyes. Dust was already filling up her lungs and she started coughing. She closed her eyes to fend off the dirt from the roof. All of a sudden, she felt her body being hoisted from the ground. She opened her eyes and saw Souji carrying her.

'Okita-sanâ€"'

'We need to get out of here. The roof's about to collapse. Where's the exit?' he asked her with a strained voice.

'T-there,' she pointed towards the direction of the back door then hurriedly covered her mouth with her hand as she was consumed yet again by another coughing fit.

'Cover your face. You'll suffocate. And hold tight,' she heard him say to her urgently. Still weak from the pain she suffered in her fall, she followed him without question. She wrapped her arms around his neck and hid her face in his chest. She did not dare look up as she felt them rush towards the exit.

'We're almost there,' he muttered after a while and she finally looked up to find the exit just a few feet away from them. She almost sighed in relief when something caught her ears again amidst the horrible screeching and growling of the wood above them.

'Help! Help me! Help!'

Her head whipped around and she caught glimpse of something red under some rubble from her left. Then it was suddenly gone from her sight as she safely crossed the threshold.

She instantly knew who it was: The girl who saw her earlier.

'Okita-san! Wait! There's someone else inside!' she suddenly shouted just as they were finally outside. She squirmed in his arms and Souji had to put her down on her feet to keep himself from dropping her.

'What? There's no one else there.'

'I saw someone! One of the girls earlier! We have to go back!' she shouted and turned on her heels back towards the room.

'Akane, wait! You can't! The building's about to collapse!' Okita grabbed her by the arm and turned her around.

'We can't just leave her!'

'You can't go back! You can barely walk!' he screamed at her.

'She's just near the door! It won't take me long!' she struggled to break free from his grip and turned away again. Before she can even take another step, however, he hurled her again, placed both hands on her shoulders and shook her.

'You crazy girl! You'll be the death of me! Just stay here! I'll go! Wait here and don't try anything stupid!' then he stormed back to the temple before she can even say anything.

Akane found herself staring dumbfounded on the spot he just left in horror and surprise. Underneath her fear of what was happening, she found herself paralyzed by the brief sight of his stormy eyes as they looked deeply into hers. She was horrified that he went inside because of her insisting and surprised at the same time at the fact that in her lifetime, she saw him in a state she never thought she will ever see him in. It was clear on his words. And on his face.

Okita Souji was afraid. For her.

She was just about to turn back to wait for him on the threshold when a loud sound similar to an explosion filled her ears and a splitting pain behind her head caused her vision to go black.

\* \* \*

><p>'Akane. Akane.'<p>

She moaned and squeezed her eyes shut tighter.

'Akane. You need to wake up.'

No. I don't want to. It hurts.\_

'Akane.'

She moaned again in pain but finally conceded to open her eyes a peek. Then she jolted awake when her vision focused on Saitou's face hovering above her. She pushed herself up from the ground then immediately regretted it. She fell back to something soft as her body registered a searing agony that nearly made her lose consciousness again.

'W-what happenedâ€|'

'Don't try to get up. Your injuries are already bad enough.'

She groaned as she finally remembered everything that happened.

'Are you okay?' her captain asked from above her.

'I'm inâ€|painâ€|' she truthfully said. Then she decided to add something. 'Am Iâ€|lying on your lap?'

'Yes.'

Despite of her agony, she inwardly flinched in embarrassment.

'I'm sorry.'

'We need to stop the bleeding of your head. You don't need to worry,' he answered in his usually calm voice.

'Is anybody else hurt?'

'No.'

'Okita-san and the girl?'

'They're fine just a few scratches!'

'That's good! I think I can sit up now!'

'Are you sure?'

'Mm-hm!'

She felt him gently pull her by the arm and help her up into a decent sitting position. When she was finally upright, she squeezed her eyes briefly to push the pain in the back of her mind before opening them again. The first thing she saw was Souji sitting on the ground with the girl sobbing in his arms. She felt relief flood her system the moment she saw his face. He did not seem to be hurt. She wanted to call out to him but her lack of energy and disorientation was still getting the best of her. Suddenly, his eyes lifted and landed on her as if she clearly called his name. She smiled the moment their gazes met. He returned it. Then she watched as he said something to the redhead before trying to pull himself off her.

Before he can fully do it, however, he was pulled forward again by the girl who tightened his grip on him and shouted something against his chest. His eyes widened a fraction at what she said. Then, slowly, he wrapped his arms around her.

Akane felt pain shot through her body. This time though, it wasn't entirely physical.

She didn't know if it was just the effect of the explosion but all of a sudden, her head felt like cotton as she watched the scene in front of her. One part of her brain was telling her everything was alright. The girl was scared and he saved her. The other side, on the other hand, nagged her with a persistent voice. And no matter how hard she tried to squash it back to the depths of her mind, it just wouldn't go.

I'm also in pain. Just like her. I was also scared. Just like her. So why is she the one he's holding now?

Before she can even dwell more on her thoughts, she ripped her eyes from the image of the two and focused on the figures of the other captains who were just approaching her from the other side of the woods. She looked at them blankly and gave them nods and reassurances when they asked her how she is. She never clearly heard their words but she tried her best to smile and tell them she's okay.

It's true, she thought. Despite of the pain and the wounds, she was more than lucky to survive. Sakura was saved and none of her friends

were hurt. The night was long but in the end, they still won it. She's actually more than okay.

That's why she wonders nowâ€!

Why does she feel as if the real dilemma has just started?

#### 24. Chapter 24: Broken

A/N: Finally an update huh?

P.S. I love reviews guys. Seriously.

\* \* \*

><p>She slightly narrowed her eyes and stared harder at the small red spot a couple of feet from her. The wind blew her hair around her gently but she stayed focused on her target.<p>

The red spot.

Get the red spot.

Shoot it in the heart.

Akane tightened her hold on the swell of her bow and placed a little more tension on the string she was pulling taut. Then she set her jaw and steeled herself. She needed to take that target. With the distance, it's just a piece of cake. Inhaling a deep, calming breath, she readied herself to release.

'Where's Souji anyway?' she heard Harada ask from the porch steps behind her.

'Probably in his room with her again,' Heisuke's voice grunted in answer.

\_Probably in his room again. \_

\_With her.\_

\_Again.\_

As if someone threw a stone over glass smooth water, Akane's concentration shattered in a snap. Then her grip slackened on the string, causing her to prematurely release it by accident. She gave a horrified gasp as she watched her arrow zoom like lightning in the air and miss her target board by a good three feet to the left. To make matters worse, it nearly dug itself on Shinpachi's stomach who was unfortunate enough to walk in at that very moment. Thankfully, the captain had enough training to hone his reflexes and jumped back just in the nick of time.

'Oi, Akane! Since when have you hated me so much you wanted to kill me?!" he shouted back at her cheerfully. Behind her, she can hear Heisuke and Harada collapsing into fits of laughter. She winced.

'Sorry, Shinpachi-san!' she called back to him and gave him an

apologetic bow as he approached the two captains who were lazily lounging on the porch steps behind her. She closed her eyes in exasperation, sighed to herself, and let the bantering of the three men wash over her. It was hopeless, she thought. Just half an hour ago, she was so convinced that training will do well on her spirits. Less than two dozen arrows later, her mind felt even more muddled and tired. Akane's hands slacked and fell on her sides limply. At the way things are going, she won't have the right mental status to go back to her old routine.

It has been two weeks since the attack on the Kageno Senshi Tachi's latest base of operations and the night seemed nothing more than a fleeting memory now. After doing a thorough check on the rubble that was once a building, the Shinsengumi decided that no rasetsu from the base has survived and that all of the ochimizu were destroyed during the collapse. Akane was fortunate enough that her wounds and broken bones were not as serious as she initially expected during the fight. After a week, she was already healing. However, she remained feeling weak and down from the ache that came along with the process.

That was the fortunate part. The unfortunate side of the story? Her wounds were not the only things that had been weighing down on her for the past few days.

It was because of him.

And her.

She can still remember what happened that night in detail.

\* \* \*

\_><p><em>'Are you sure you don't need me to go with you?'<em>

\_ 'Come on, Akane. You look even worse than me. You should just stay here.'

\_ 'Butâ€"'

\_ 'I'm fine. Don't worry, besidesâ€"'

\_ 'Sakura. Let's go?'

\_ Sakura turned around to face a dust covered Heisuke behind her. All around them, the captains and some of Shinsengumi members Yamazaki brought with him for reinforcements were taking care of the other hostages, interrogating them briefly before sending them off to their homes. Majority of the kidnapped girls were shaken and traumatized enough to require an escort. Sakura, in all her waxen skin and sunken eyes, however, were not one of them. She looked tired but she remained composed and calm throughout the night. In fact, she looked more scared when she saw her bloodied and nearly limping in pain.

-

\_ 'Yes, in a while,' her friend smiled briefly at the young captain before turning to face her again. Sakura caught her hands and held them together tightly between her own.\_

\_ 'Thank you Akaneâ€|' she smiled at her fondly. It was ironic, she thought, how the energetic girl she knew can look so pacified after

an almost near death encounter. For the second time that night, she felt her heart swell with pride at Sakura's strength. She showed it by smiling back and gently squeezing the hands holding her. \_

\_ 'I'm glad you're alright.' \_

\_ 'I wouldn't be if not for all of you. You've hurt yourself out there. I'm really sorry.' \_

\_ She shook her head. 'No. I couldn't have stayed put knowing that you're in trouble. You know that.' \_

\_ Sakura laughed at what she said. 'Yes, I never doubted that for a second.' \_

\_ Both girls stared at each other for a moment. It was Akane who broke the silence. \_

\_ 'I'm proud of you,' she whispered. 'You were really strong back there.' \_

\_ 'It was partly because I knew you were coming, that's why. It actually makes me feel guilty and relieved at the same time,' her friend said a little sheepishly. \_

\_ 'Well then, I think it's time for you to go home. You look tired.' \_

\_ 'Says the one who has blood covering one side of her face,' the brunette winked at her. Akane laughed mildly, not wanting to put any unnecessary force that can split her head open again in pain. Then she slightly pushed Sakura back. 'Go on, Heisuke's waiting for you.' \_

\_ 'Mm. See you. I'll visit you soon, okay?' \_

\_ 'Hai. Take care.' \_

\_ She was watching her friend's retreating back when a thought suddenly struck her. \_

\_ 'Hey, Sakura!' \_

\_ Sakura turned around to see her lightly jogging towards her. Akane placed her lips near her ear and whispered, 'Just so you know, Heisuke was really worried too. I've never seen him look so serious,' she said with a smile tainting her voice. \_

\_ Even in the darkness, she had no doubts that her friend's cheeks were suddenly on fire. She watched with amusement as Heisuke curiously peered at the brunette's face before the two finally disappeared in the path leading out of the woods. \_

\_ 'Ah, the image of young love. Interesting to look at, eh?' \_

\_ Akane looked up to see Harada smiling down at her, cradling his left forearm which was currently clumsily wrapped with bandages. The smile she was about to give him froze on her lips when she saw it was still bleeding. \_

\_ 'Sano-san, are you alright? That looks serious.' \_

\_ 'Oh, this? No problem. It's far from the heart. It won't kill me.' \_

\_ 'You should have that checked. Did Yamazaki clean it already?' she eyed the messily woven bandages around the wound suspiciously, not the least convinced that everything is fine.\_

\_ 'Not yet. But it can wait. He has to take care of the other girls who were injured. I'm fine. It's not something I would cry over.' \_

\_ 'Butâ€" '\_

\_ 'Please let me stay!' \_

\_ Akane wasn't able to finish what she was about to say when a desperate, tear-filled voice echoed a couple of feet away from her. She and Harada looked at the direction the same time and saw the red-haired girl they saved earlier kneeling on the grass with her head on the ground. Souji was sitting nearby with an unreadable expression on his face and in front of them stood Hijikata who was eyeing her with a mixture of exasperation and discomfort. They looked at each other briefly with the same question on their eyes. Then Harada silently nodded his head towards the trio's direction.

\_ They heard Hijikata speaking in a controlled tone when they were finally within hearing range. \_

\_ 'There is no way we can let someone go with us to the headquarters. Tell us where you came from and we will gladly give you an escort,' the vice-commander said with his usual scowl on his face. The girl visibly shivered at his cold intonation but kept her head on the ground. \_

\_ 'Iâ€"I have no house to go home toâ€|" she stuttered weakly. Hijikata's frown deepened at what she said.\_

\_ 'What do you mean?' \_

\_ 'W-Whorehouseâ€|I came from a whorehouse. My employer just asked me to buy some supplies last night because our errand boy was sick. I was cornered in an alleyway on my way back and the next thing I knew I was already in this rundown building when I woke up. I can't go back there. I don't want to go back there. Please don't let me return. That place is hell.' \_

\_ Akane's eyes widened at what she heard. Beside her, she also felt Harada stiffen as well. The girl's voice cracked and she bowed her head even deeper. Her frail looking back shook and heaved as sobs finally overtook her body. \_

\_ Hijikata's scowl lessened in intensity. He still looked stern but Akane knew that he felt compassion for the broken girl in front of him. When he spoke, his voice also sounded kinder to her ears as well. \_

\_ 'Do you have no relatives you can go to?' \_

\_The girl shook her head slowly. 'I am from H-Hiroshima. An orphan. I went to Kyoto to try my luck. But I ended with the wrong people.'

-

\_Hijikata's lips thinned into a line. He continued staring at the girl cowering on the ground for a few more moments. Then, he heaved a small sigh. \_

\_ 'A month. We will give you a month to live with us. Use that time to look for another job or a new home. Do whatever it is you want to do as long as you don't extend over a month. We cannot keep a woman at our headquarters for too long.' \_

\_At his retort reply, the girl scrambled to her feet in surprise and stared at Hijikata in shock. Tears were freely streaming down her dirt stained face and her eyes were wide as if she couldn't believe what she was hearing. There was a light in her eyes that Akane immediately recognized as hope. \_

\_ 'You mean Iâ€"I canâ€"' \_

\_ 'For only a month,' Hijikata said, clearly unwilling to repeat himself again. The girl's lips broke into a relieved smile.\_

\_ 'Yes! Yes a month. That would be enough. Thank you very much for your kindness, sir. Thank you very much.' \_

\_The vice-commander merely nodded at her before turning on his back. He threw a brief glance at Souji and Harada before finally leaving.

-

\_ 'Harada, take care of things here. I have to talk to the chief. Souji, get your wounds checked. At least bandage it if Yamazaki can't look at it yet.' \_

\_With the mention of his name, Akane automatically tore her eyes off the girl and trained them on Okita instead. He was still leaning on the tree with the closed expression on his face. That was when she finally realized that the dark stain covering the right side of his shoulder wasn't dirt or mud but blood. She didn't even have enough time to realize what she was doing because the next thing she knew, she was bending over him, peering at the gash on his skin.\_

\_ 'We need to take care of that,' she whispered as if afraid he'll run away if she shocked him. As if someone hit him, Okita started on his seat and stared at her. By then, she was already peeling away the blood drenched kimono from his skin. \_

\_ 'Did you go to Yamazaki for that head wound?' he asked her, not seemingly aware of what she was doing. She nodded her head and continued gently pulling off the cloth.\_

\_ 'Yes. He said I'm fine. I just got shock from the wood that hit me but I'm okay. He said I'll only need a few stitches.' \_

\_ Souji gently released what seemed to be a breath he was holding. Then suddenly, he winced and gritted his teeth when she made one last pull of the torn cloth from his shoulder. Akane backed away and looked at him worriedly.\_

\_ 'I'm sorry. I just had to look at it. We need to clean it.' \_

\_ 'I can take care of it.' \_

\_ Before any one of them could answer, the red haired girl inched a little closer to their position. Her eyes were downcast as if she was embarrassed and she was fidgeting with her kimono anxiously. Akane stared at her uncomprehendingly for a moment before she finally spoke again, this time her voice a little louder.\_

\_ 'I worked as a doctor's apprentice years ago. I can tend it for you,' she mumbled before peering nervously at her, then at Souji. She didn't know why but Akane found herself withdrawing her hands from his shoulder and falling back a little at the girl's words. She cleared her throat.\_

\_ 'Are youâ€|are you feeling well enough to move,  
ummâ€| ' \_

\_ 'Hotaruâ€|my name is Hotaruâ€|And yes, I'm fine. I just want to helpâ€| ' \_

\_ 'There's no need. I can take this to Yamazaki. I think he's about finished now,' Okita said as he tried to push himself upright from his seat. \_

\_ 'Wait! P-please let me do it! You saved me. It's the least I can doâ€|' the girl called Hotaru said in a rush and looked at them desperately. The two of them started a little at the panic on her voice and face. \_It was her who recovered first.\_

\_ 'If that's the case thenâ€|then can you please help him?' she said and tried to give the girl a small smile. Hotaru beamed shyly at her and nodded her head before rushing to their side. As she stepped away to give her some space, she felt a little pang of pain as she watched the girl start to busy herself. She felt bad. Okita still looked composed but there was a very slight frown on his face that betrayed the real pain he felt. She knew it was her fault. If she wasn't so stubborn earlier, he would not have been injured. But then again, the girl, Hotaru won't be saved. \_

\_ Her body a huge mass of pain and her emotions too highly strung to take another blow; she decided to turn her back on the scene before her. As she was about to go, Okita's eyes lifted briefly to hers and connected with her brown ones. It was a fleeting look, one that she cut immediately, but it was all it took to make her emotion turn into a mess once again. \_

\_ That was the last, most personal encounter she had with him in the last two weeks. \_

Hotaru spent most of her time with Okita as his nurse in the last fortnight. Yamazaki already had his hands full with Harada who had an equally serious wound so the officers did not have any qualms about her volunteering for the job. Everyone can clearly see how decided the girl is in making it back to Souji after he saved her from the collapsing building. She was still a bundle of nerves every time they see her in the brief moments that she went out of his room but she sounded and looked so calm every time she is with him. For a couple

of times, Akane heard the captains comment playfully about how outsiders can easily mistake the two as more than acquaintances who just met a couple of days ago with the level of familiarity she was giving him.

She wasn't even strong enough to deny that she also felt the same.

Okita was never someone who liked being fawned over and he showed that even to Hotaru during the first few days that they were together. He would always give her teasing replies, the same ones that he threw Akane when she first arrived at the Shinsengumi. Unlike her, however, Hotaru doesn't retaliate or scream at him in frustration. She simply blushes and keeps quiet with a small smile ever so slightly curving her perfect little lips. Akane supposed Souji never found that challenging because after a while, he just seemed to have given up and started treating her normally. One day, as she was walking past his room on her way to the kitchen, she heard them laughing together about something. She knew he was giving her the same treatment he gives to his friends but she can't help but feel a little unsettled by it. Then there was another moment when she saw them sitting together at the inner courtyard, him cleaning his sword and her smiling contentedly beside him.

They looked so good together she almost felt physical pain.

'Are you sure you're already healed enough to be killing that target board?'

Akane was suddenly shaken from her reverie when a familiar voice broke through her thoughts. She looked up just in time to see the very boy she was thinking of walking towards her with a slight smirk on his face.

'Okita-san!' '

'Missed me?' he winked at her playfully and leaned on the pole next to Harada whose bandaged forearm was currently being poked by a snickering Heisuke and Shinpachi. She closed her mouth, not knowing how to answer his question.

'Hey, Souji. Nice to finally see you again. We thought you were permanently chained to your room already!' 'Oi! Will you two stop that!' Harada called out to the newcomer before swatting away the hand of the two captains playfully. Shinpachi and Heisuke, however, were no longer paying attention to him and have trained their attentions to Okita instead.

'Ah, yes, Souji seems to be enjoying lately, isn't he?' Shinpachi said, his eyebrow cocked playfully and his lips stretched in a grin.

'Yeah, yeah. I wonder if you really are healed already. With someone as beautiful as that nursing you all day and all night, well!' Heisuke cooed knowingly and wriggled his eyebrows at him. Akane forced to swallow through dry throat as she listened to what the men were implying.

Okita, however, seemed to be unaffected by the duo's teasing. He simply gave them a casual shrug and looked at her again.

'So, are you feeling any better?'

'I don't think I should be the one answering that. After all, I wasn't the one who got locked in my room for half a month,' she said coolly as she turned her back on the captains and nocked a new arrow in her bow. Her voice sounded harsh, almost angry. She knew it was unfair. He didn't do anything to her at all, but still.

To her chagrin, she heard him chuckling lightly in response. When he spoke again, there was a knowing tone in his voice.

'It isn't my fault Hijikata was acting all mother hen on me.'

Behind her, she heard Shinpachi's sarcastic grunt. 'Yeah? But why are you the only one who gets to have a beautiful caretaker? Sano is equally injured but he got Yamazaki instead! I don't know about you but he and your little nurse sure looked extremely different for me when it comes to looks!' he exclaimed incredulously and nudged a laughing Harada by the side.

'Shinpatsu-san you really are clueless! It's not really Souji's fault that the girl had the hots for him!' Heisuke guffawed in return.

Akane, who was unfortunate enough to choose that exact same moment to pull her string back, felt a thrumming in her ears that caused her to lose her concentration again. Her arrow zoomed over the target board and dug itself on the bark of the tree near the gate. She gritted her teeth in frustration and tried to stop herself from groaning out loud. Unbeknownst to her, the action did not miss Harada who was listening to the ruckus around him with an exasperated expression on his face. He finally sighed knowingly after taking note of the strained set of shoulders of the girl. Then he leaned over, cracked his knuckles, and dug his fists playfully on the top of Shinpachi and Heisuke's heads. The duo protested angrily but he only answered them with one swat each.

'You two are too noisy. You're distracting Akane.'

'We're not!'

'You didn't have to do that you old man!'

'Zip it, Heisuke. Just when I was thinking I wanted to treat the both of you to some sake today.'

A babble of surprised, senseless noises erupted from the two captains.

'Whoah, really?! Come on then! What are we waiting for?!"

'Oh Sano! That's nice! Let's go before Hijikata sees us!"

Akane, who was only half-listening to what was happening behind her, finally turned around to see the three retreating to the hallway. Just when they turned into the corner, Harada looked back at her and gave her a playful wink. Then they were gone. She felt something loosen up in her chest a little and muttered a silent thank you to him. He really is a good man. She found herself smiling back at him

even after he was already gone.

'They make this whole place lively with their useless banter, right?'

Remembering that she wasn't alone yet, Akane promptly turned her back on Souji after giving a soft sound of agreement. She leaned over to pack up her arrows and other equipment, her face hidden from him. Silence fell over them and stretched for minutes. She wanted to talk to him, ask him if he's okay, and tell him that she's sorry for putting him in trouble again. She wanted to know if he still needed to stay with Hotaru. There were so many things running in her mind that moment. Still, she stayed silent.

'Kitten.'

She froze for a split-second with the sound of his voice. Then she continued packing her things again.

'Yes, Okita-san?'

It took him so long to answer to the point that she thought she only imagined him calling her. When she was finally finished and was just about to turn and face him, he finally spoke.

'Meet me at the sakura tree here tonight. Two hours after dinner.'

Akane stiffened then slowly faced him. 'Tonight? Why?' she asked uncertainly.

'What, you didn't think you got off from our arrangement two weeks ago, right? Well, I have something different to tell you this time though so make sure you come,' Okita answered with a handsome smirk on his face. His tone sounded light but its serious undertones did not evade her ears. She felt heat slowly pool on her cheeks as she remembered that they were indeed supposed to meet up two weeks ago, just after they came from Edo. With all the things that happened though, it clearly slipped her mind.

'Don't try to ditch me, okay? Unless you want me to personally get you. I won't have any problem talking to you in your room,' he said, cocking his head to one side. Before she can even respond to that last thing he said, he grinned at her widely, turned, and disappeared in the hallway.

And with that, she was left alone to deal with her flushed cheeks and a wildly thumping heart.

\* \* \*

><p>It was around half past 8 in the evening when Akane finally decided to stop her pacing in her room and slip out towards the inner courtyard. She didn't want to go at first, anxious of whatever it is he might tell her, but decided to push herself to see him anyway out of fear that he might really barge into her room later. She knew quite well from experience that he wasn't the type who doesn't take his words seriously. She now hugged her robe a little more snugly into her body, leaned on the tree bark, and looked at the night sky. It was full of stars and the moon was peeking in and out of the

clouds every now and then. It washed the inner courtyard with beams of light that reminded her of watery sunlight in a cold day. It was a beautiful night. Peaceful and calm.<p>

\_ 'I think it's about time. I know we've both been waiting for it long enough already.' \_

Out of nowhere, Okita's voice skittered into her mind unwittingly; making her heart suddenly beat again in anticipation and anxiety. She bit her lip and chewed on it nervously. She won't be a hypocrite and say she didn't have any idea of what he is planning to tell her. Akane knew in herself that there is only one thing she is waiting for from him. In fact, she knew it even before she realized she was waiting for it. And it is clearly making her unbalanced right now.

Dropping to sit on the roots of the sakura tree she was currently leaning on, she now tilted her head and stared through the cherry blossoms swaying in the wind. She was briefly reminded of the times when she did the same in the sakura in front of her house, the Shinsengumi book cradled gently on her lap, forefinger hooked on the page she was currently reading. Now she is living the story, breathing, laughing, and moving with the people who were only alive in the pages of the book before. Never in her wildest dreams did she think she will have this fate, let alone fall in love with one of the legendary captains of one of Japan's greatest group of warriors.

Before, Okita Souji was no more than the first troop's captain, a prodigy with the sword, and one of the most loyal followers of the Shinsengumi's values for her. She admired him. His courage and his skill. Now, after a strange turn of events, he is the man she loves. The one she would willingly leave behind everything for just to see him smile and laugh regardless of whether he returns her feelings or not. Despite of herself, she couldn't help but hope for the best. The way he laughed, moved, and looked at her made her genuinely hope that maybe, just maybe, someone like him will stop and look at her as a girl. Closing her eyes, she reveled in the memories that led her to feel this way about him. When she gave her that charm under the moonlight, when he saved him from Ayato's lair, when he waited for her in the porch. She was already in too deep even before she realized what she has gotten herself into.

Suddenly, she had a strong desire to get things over with.

Her eyes still closed, Akane touched a hand to the place just above her heart. It was still beating erratically but the anxiety was now laced with a more positive emotion. She smiled to herself, opened her eyes, and pushed herself up from her seat. She knew it sounds crazy but something seems to be telling her to not wait and look for him instead. She felt so positive, so hopeful that she knew she wouldn't be able to hold herself and wait for him any longer even if she tried. Every single doubt from her mind just flew out of the window and she suddenly didn't care if she'll look like a fool in front of him with what she's about to do.

She just needed to tell him now.

With one last look at the moon that peeked from behind a cloud, Akane took off towards his room with a lightness on her step.

\* \* \*

><p>When she finally reached his door, the small smile on her lips was still there. It was a little past the destined time of their meeting and she suddenly felt worried about them missing each other. Just when she was about to tap on the divider, she heard a voice from inside.</p>

'Are you going somewhere, Okita-san?'

Akane stopped in the middle of knocking at the sound of Hotaru's voice. Her heart, which was full of lightness just a second ago suddenly felt like dead weight on her chest.

'Ah, yes. I just have to meet someone. I won't take long,' she heard Souji's voice say from just the other side of the door. She suddenly unfroze from her spot and leaned on the wall beside his room, clutching her robe tightly around her. She suddenly felt scared as she heard a few scratching noises from inside the room as if someone's shifting on the floor. Not wanting to confront him with Hotaru inside his room, she decided to just go back to the courtyard and wait for him there. She was just about to turn and silently walk away when she heard the slight opening of the door followed by the girl's gentle voice.

'You're going to see Akane right?'

Both she and Okita seemed to have stopped at the same time. She stopped on her tracks while he froze on the slightly opened door just before he was able to take a step outside. Akane felt rooted on her spot.

'Yes. I am,' Souji said calmly from inside the room. His voice was clear now that the door was already slightly opened. Silence fell for a moment before the sound of a rustling of clothes and a body being slightly dragged back sounded from inside. Akane's eyes widened as she realized what was happening. She didn't have to see it to know the girl was embracing Okita from behind.

'Ho-Hotaru, wait, let go!'

'No! Please don't leave!' Hotaru answered with such a desperate tone that made her nearly choke.

'What's gotten into you?' Okita asked with a strained voice that sounded like a mixture of frustration and worry over the girl. She simply remained in the shadows, transfixed at what was happening.

'I like you! Ever since that day you saved me, I couldn't help but feel like this! I was in the brink of madness and you changed that even after only a couple of days. I know you want her, but can't you please look at me instead?!'

Suddenly, as if someone turned the volume off, thick silence pervaded the room once more. Souji seemed to be as shocked as Akane who was now staring unseeingly at the dark patch of land she was facing.

'I know you act uncaring and dismissive at times. I know you don't like me. But I don't care. I need someone to hold on to and I wanted

you to be that person. Please Okita-san. I will do anything. Everything. Just, just give me a chance. Please. I don't want to be alone again.'

At the girl's words, Akane found herself putting more of her weight against the wall she was currently leaning on for support. She felt weak and drained as if she ran for miles. The steady sound of Hotaru's sobbing from the room wasn't also helping her disposition. She sounded so pitiful and desperate while Okita just stood there, not making any sound or movement that can betray his reaction. Was he sad? Angry? Surprised? There was nothing that gave him away and it was slowly killing her and the girl inside the room.

'Hotaru! can you please let me go?'

A much louder sob sounded from inside the room.

'Please? I'm not going to leave anymore.'

A sharp pain echoed in the middle of Akane's chest at his words. He said it so softly that she almost thought it was another person speaking. She never heard him speak to her that way, ever. Not when he was worried about her or when she was hurt. Every single time he always sounded so scared and aggressive. Never gentle. The pain from her chest started to slowly creep to the tips of her fingers down to her toes at that thought. She felt numb.

From inside the room, however, Hotaru seemed to be feeling the exact opposite as her. When the girl spoke again, her voice sounded weak, scared, but hopeful at the same time.

'You! You won't?'

'Yes.'

'Does that mean-Does that mean you chose me?'

She never heard any answer. Instead, she heard the sound of someone turning and the pulling of one body into the embrace of another. There was an audible female sigh that sounded between happiness and surprise. Something wet fell on her cheeks at every sound of movement that came from the room.

'Can you! show me? Tonight? Show me that you're mine?'

Again, there was silence. The air was only disturbed by the rustle of clothing followed by the muffled sound of Hotaru's voice as her lips were covered by something.

'Okita-san, wait,' the girl gasped in intervals. 'Akane. Please tell her you're not coming first. She's waiting for you.'

The rustling suddenly stopped, exchanged by heavy breathing. Souji's voice finally drifted from the slightly opened door, composed and sure.

'Never mind. She isn't important.'

Something broke with a deafening crack. The armor of numbness shattered into tiny little pieces, each shard cutting and bruising

her until she bled. Akane felt as if she was shot, the wound made terrible by the the assurity she felt about it never healing again. With a hand clutched over the hole punched in her chest, the broken girl turned on her heel before she even collapsed on the floor, ran, and disappeared into the night.

## 25. Chapter 25: Rebuilding Shattered Pieces

A/N: Thank you SO MUCH for the reviews. I got so fired up I actually broke my schedule to do this one (which was actually scheduled after 3 weeks). So...I'm not sure if the writing's nicely done on this but i do hope you enjoy!

\* \* \*

><p>When Sakura heard someone knocking on their door at an ungodly hour, she already had a tirade of speech ready in her mind. It was not uncommon for them to have silly drunken men banging at their shop, thinking they can buy more sake from them even after they have already closed. To be sure, she carried a long stick in her right hand just in case. She didn't want to wake her father up to deal with this. Wrapping her robe tighter around her, her hand clutching the stick more steadily, she ripped open the door.<p>

Her speech froze in the back of her throat and she stared unbelievingly at the person outside.

'For the love ofâ€"Akane! What happened to you!'

The brunette ushered her shivering friend inside in a hurry and peered at her worriedly, trying to look if there are any signs that she is hurt. Akane was never the type of girl who really made an effort to look feminine, partly because she was perpetually disguising as a boy. Tonight though, she looked disastrous. Her nose was red from the cold and her sleek, straight long hair which she usually kept up is a cloud of mess around her small face. Her cheeks were pale as were her lips. Amidst all these though, it was her eyes that really worried her. They were glistening with something and they were darting around frantically. Something pierced Sakura's heart as she drank in her image.

She looked like a lost, scared child.

'Akaneâ€|? Akane what happened?'

The girl focused her eyes on her.

'I'm sorry, you were the only one I can go to,' she whispered softly. Sakura noted how her voice trembled ever so slightly.

'No, no it's okay,' she shushed her friend gently. She looked ready to break. 'Here, sit here. Tell me what happened.'

A tremor seemed to have passed Akane's body first. A light came on in her eyes as if she remembered something. Then, finally, she broke down crying.

\* \* \*

><p>Akane lightly sipped on the tea Sakura offered her earlier. It was now cold but she didn't care. She just needed something else to do to help her mind stray away from the thoughts running around her head. In front of her, Sakura sat silently with a worried look etched on her features. She was just watching her, waiting for her to continue her story.</p>

Unfortunately, for the both of them, there was nothing else she can continue it with.

\_That was just it. Okita and Hotaru. Together. While she is just someone who isn't important. \_

She swallowed through the lump in her throat to try to push the tears back. Her eyes felt raw and swollen. She knew she had already cried enough.

Probably it's her belief that the man she loved liked her back, even for just a little. Probably it's the confidence that she so wrongly placed on their connection. Probably it's the knowledge that despite of everything they had gone through, she didn't carry much weight in his life. Whatever the reason is, all she knew was that she's blinded by pain at the moment. She let herself hope too much, soar too much. And because of her flight, her fall was all the more damaging. She's broken. Probably irreversibly shattered to pieces.

'When did you realize?'

She looked up as Sakura's voice broke through her thoughts.

'Realizeâ€|what?'

'That you're in love with him.'

'Oh. Uhâ€|probably a month agoâ€|'

Something flashed across Sakura's features.

'I see.'

'Why are you asking?'

'No reason at allâ€|'

Akane knew her friend was lying but she didn't have the energy to probe her to tell the truth. She looked down on her cup and started gently tipping it back and forth, watching the liquid inside sift.

'How are you feeling?'

She let out a dry laugh. 'Horrible.'

'Are you angry?'

Akane stopped rotating the tea cup and stared at it. Somehow, she knew Sakura wanted to ask her this and she was hoping against hope she wouldn't. But her friend welcomed her, wiped her tears, and held her hand silently while she relayed her story. So despite her

personal wish to just keep everything inside and bury all the emotions choking her, she drew a deep breath and stared straight at the girl in front of her.

'Yes.'

'At him?'

She tightened her hold on the cup.

'Yes.'

Both girls fell silent for a while. One was struggling to make sense of her emotions while the other simply waited in silence.

'I really felt betrayed,' Akane whispered after a while. Sakura nodded her head solemnly, giving her the confidence and support she needed to let out the feelings she had been trying to deny herself.

'I was so angry at him. When he said I was not not,' she stopped, unable to repeat what he said out loud. She closed her eyes briefly and tried to reign in her emotions before continuing. Sakura reached out for her hand and gently wiped away the tears that were streaming silently down her cheeks again. Akane held on to the brunette's grasp as if her life was depending on that one, firm hold.

'But I was angrier at myself. Because I thought when I was waiting for him by the tree, I thought I'll be okay even if he doesn't feel the same way. I thought I can handle it. But when I heard them, when he chose her over me...When I heard it, Sakura just felt so hurt. And scared. I was very very scared. Because that moment, I was so close to charging his room and ripping him away from her. I wanted Hotaru gone. And I was so terrified because I realized I realized my feelings for him are not selfless at all. I can't like him from a distance. I wanted him all for myself. I was so willing to do everything just to keep him even though he chose her. I was so selfish. And I never looked at myself that way. That darkness that I felt, it was the most horrible feeling I've ever had.'

Sakura held on to Akane's hand and nodded in understanding as she watched the other girl break down silently again. She knew that was what's bothering her the moment she heard her story. Akane felt hurt, yes, but what was really killing her was the fact that she hated herself for feeling the emotions she felt. Besides from the pain that she had to deal about Okita, she was punishing and questioning herself by thinking she's a bad person because of her desire to be with him. It was a feeling she knew so well. She sighed.

'Akane do you want to know why my family moved to Kyoto?'

Akane simply shook her head and tried to wipe away her tears. Sakura took in a deep breath and started patting her friend's hand comfortingly.

'Do you want to hear the story?'

She nodded.

'You see...I had a childhood friend back home. We grew up together, literally did all things together. We were so close to the point that

each of our families considered us as the child of the other. That was also the reason why our parents weren't so surprised at all when he started to court me. Everyone thought we were perfect for each other. We were together for two years,' the brunette said softly, a tender expression on her face. Her lips were curved in a gentle yet sad smile.

'One day, he asked me to meet him on the hills we always go to after we're finished with our day jobs. I thoughtâ€|Well, I thought he was going to ask me to marry him. Turns out he had a different surprise for me. That was the same day we separated. He said the girl was from another island. He was a fisherman and he met her when his boat got stranded in the midst of a storm. Her family let him stay a couple of days as he waited for the typhoon to pass. When the rain finally did stop, his feelings for her were strong enough to marry herâ€|andâ€|leave me.'

Akane's heart jumped and she stared at her friend, momentarily forgetting her own problems. Sakura was staring at the table with such a sad, broken expression that effectively stopped her own tears. Never in her life did she think that the bubbly girl she came to know had a past like that.

'Did youâ€|hate him for what he did to you?' she couldn't help but ask after gaping at her for quite a long time. Sakura only smiled sadly at her.

'I tried not to. He brought her to our place to start their family barely a week after he cut off his ties with me. I was so devastated but because we were friends first before we became lovers, I treated them warmly. I said I was okay. I smiled and laughed at them. All because I thought it was unfair of me to be angry at him when I see him so happy with her. Butâ€|deep insideâ€|I was actually rotting. I was broken when he left me and I denied myself to feel everything I should have felt towards the situation. At the end of it all, I can only pretend for so long. I was so depressed I came begging for my parents to take me away because I can no longer breathe the same air as them...And so we came here to start a new life.'

Silence fell over them, heavy and full of meaning. Sakura's words hung over the air like dead weight.

'Do you still miss him?' Akane asked after a while, albeit a little hesitantly.

The brunette only answered her with a harsh bitter laugh.

'Every single day. If I don't, I wouldn't cling and run after Heisuke like a madman. They haveâ€|uhâ€|the same eyesâ€|'

'Ohâ€|' Akane trailed off, finally understanding the reason why Sakura sometimes seems go to extremes when it comes to the young captain. It's her way of dealing with what she's gone through. The hand holding her tightened around her own and she looked up again at her friend.

'Do you understand now what I'm trying to say to you, Akane?'

She shook her head.

'This means, that whatever you're feeling right now is completely normal. The feeling of pain usually comes along with hate. It's just the way us humans react to situations that hurt us. I prodded you to speak out your feelings because I don't want you to end up like me before. Blaming yourself for hating, for being selfish. You know, there are also moments when we can also afford not to be righteous. If you really want to be worthy enough to like him selfishly, you just have to go through those feelings. Because in the end, it's not his fault that he chose someone else. You have no control over what others feel. You only have reign over your emotions.'

Akane listened silently at her friend, letting Sakura's every word wash through her.

'Do you get it now, Akane? To deal with this, you only have to do one thing.'

'You let yourself feel.'

\* \* \*

><p>It was just after daybreak when Akane decided to make her way back home. She now passed the stoic gates of the headquarters, shivering a little as a wave of cold morning air bit through her skin. The sun had properly risen over the horizon by now but the place still looked deserted. She still has a good two hours to continue the short amount of sleep she had on Sakura's place before the breakfast call. Not wanting anyone to know she slipped out during the night, she treaded silently towards her room.</p>

She was just a couple of meters away from it when the silence was broken by the opening of a door and frantic steps. She turned to look at the direction of the sound, a cold feeling that had nothing to do with the low temperature of early morning settling in the pits of her stomach. The sound of footsteps brought her eyes to the direction of the sakura tree.

When her eyes found the source, she froze, her breath stuck painfully in her chest.

Okita was staring at the tree in confusion, his eyes bleary as if he didn't sleep at all. Akane's heart suddenly started beating frantically as she realized he just needed to turn his head to find her in the yard. Thoughts suddenly clouded her mind in an instant.

\_Run. Hide. Escape. You don't want to see him right now.\_

But it was too late. She just had the sense to turn when his eyes flitted to her direction. They widened momentarily in relief before he started sprinting towards her. Akane took a step back, fear loading her senses in overdrive. She wanted to run but he was already too close. As he approached, she noticed his messed up hair and inner robe which he seemed to have only hastily put on over him. She felt sick.

'Where have you been?' he asked the moment he reached her, his eyes worried. Looking at him now, she never would have thought he was the same person last night who dismissed her presence so bluntly in front of another girl. She took another step back and tried to look at

anything else but him.

'I went for a walk,' she answered neutrally.

'You went for a what? Aren't we supposed to meet here last night? I checked you on your room but you were gone.'

The slight frustration she heard in his voice made her look straight at him. Without blinking, she answered in the most casual voice she can muster.

'I went to the sakura tree as arranged. You weren't there.'

Souji stopped as if he realized something. Then a frown settled over his features.

'That was not enough reason for you to go sneaking out after dark. You know that's against the rules. If you wanted to go somewhere you should have waited for me!'

That was the most she can manage. The frustration and admonition in his words were like salt to the wounds she was still nursing. She can't even make sense out of everything he was saying. She was barely struggling to hold on to what Sakura told her. That it wasn't his fault he chose another. But then again, her friend also told her to feel.

And so she let herself feel.

'Stop it. Just stop it,' she cut him off in a whisper. She briefly saw confusion register on his face before she finally turned around to leave. She barely made two steps when she felt his hand circle her wrist and pull her back.

'What is wrong with you? If this is about me not making it last night on time, I'm sorry. I had to deal with something but I tried to rush there as soon as I can, if you only waited for me!'

Akane's patience finally snapped. She ripped her hand from his grasp and whipped around to face him.

'Oh so what do you think I should have done? Wait for you out there in the cold like a good girl while you go off somewhere doing whatever it is you're doing? If that's so then I'm SORRY I did not wait for you to finish!' she half shouted at him, barely caring anymore if she woke other people in the house. She could hear her own blood thundering in her ears and her hands felt hot and cold at the same time. Her throat seemed like it closed up and it was taking her everything not to cry in front of him like a weakling.

Okita, on the other hand, doesn't seem to be as surprised as expected of her outburst. As soon as she spat out the last word, a knowing, grim look settled on his features. He looked at her with glum eyes.

'You were there, weren't you?' he asked gravely. 'You heard it?'

She was so stretched to the limit she felt she's going to crack anytime.

'I don't even know why you care, Okita-san,' she continued, not even trying to answer his question. The words were just pouring out like a vicious flood out of her. 'What I do with my life is not anyone's business especially for a person who doesn't think I matter,' Akane balled her hands into fists in a weak effort to control herself but failed. 'I don't know what it is you still want from me.'

'Akaneâ€" Souji tried to reach out to her but she just backed away as if touching him will burn her.

'Is it the thrill of having more than one girl? That'sâ€"That's pretty normal here, right? If it is, then I'm sorry. I can't do it. Just look for someone else, okay? I'm not cut for that kind of thing. So please, I'm begging you, just spare me because that's not something I can take,' the tears brimming in her eyes were now dangerously on the brink of falling.

'That's not it. Listen to meâ€"'

'Souji.'

Akane swallowed the sob on her throat and she suddenly looked up to see Hijikata standing on the hallway, looking down on them. There was a serious expression on his face that was equally mirrored by the tone of his voice. She suddenly turned away, trying to inconspicuously hide her tears. Okita, on the other hand, remained facing her, his face a hard mask. He looked almost angry.

'I'm talking to her, Hijikata-san,' he said in a chilling voice.

'I need to talk to you now,' the vice-commander easily matched his tone though the former's sounded a little gentler.

'I'm sure that can wait.'

'Actually, it can't.'

Okita remained motionless, his eyes trained on her. Realizing that he won't go away unless she tells him to, she gathered all the remaining willpower she had and stared back at him.

'Just leave me alone.'

He tensed his jaw at her words.

'Souji,' the vice-commander called to him once more, but now with more urgency.

Okita just stood there, looking at her with stormy eyes. Then, after a very long tense period, he finally turned and marched angrily towards Hijikata. Akane watched his retreating back silently. When he finally turned around the corner, her gaze settled over the vice-commander. They just looked at each other for a while before the man finally moved his eyes downward and gave him a very slight bow of his head.

She would have mulled over her commander's actions if only she didn't feel so broken inside.

\* \* \*

><p>'No, but then she said, who do you think you are? You are just a monkey who was lucky enough escape his cage! And then Heisuke had no other choice of course but to jump in!'<p>

'Yeah, because the turd that he is will always choose a fight over a nice woman!'

Akane burst out laughing together with Harada, Shinpachi, and Sakura. They were currently sitting on their favourite spot by the porch, grinning and smiling foolishly at a red-faced Heisuke standing in front of them.

'What did you expect me to do then? Let them hack her to death? And you, young lady! You should really start watching your mouth,' the young captain placed both hands on his waist and admonished Sakura sternly.

'Who are you calling young lady? You're about the same age as I am,' Sakura shot back and stuck her tongue at him.

'Ooohhh, the lovers are fighting,' Shinpachi said teasingly and wagged his eyebrows suggestively at Heisuke.

'We aren't lovers!'

'Oh, you're just saying that now,' Sakura cooed and winked at him. The captain blushed beet red, causing the four of them to collapse into giggles again. Then the brunette starting making fake kissing noises that made Harada and Shipachi howl in laughter. Akane snickered and pushed Sakura playfully away in an attempt to make her stop.

It has been a couple of days ever since that tense morning happened. She was still feeling down most of the time but she could not deny that her spirits have significantly improved afterwards. After that morning, Akane realized Sakura was right. When she finally came to terms with her feelings, the weight of self-loathing that dragged her down started to leave her system little by little. The conversation she had with Okita had been ugly, yes, but it helped her cope up slowly. Now, even though she can still feel debilitating pain every time she sees them, she no longer has the urge to break down crying.

Sakura's constant presence by her side also helped her a lot. It was now normal occurrence for the Shinsengumi to see the cheerful brunette waving out to them from the front gates, carrying a fresh basket of goods from her shop. Thankfully, nobody seemed to question her regular attendance and was immediately accepted into the fold of Shinpachi, Harada, and Heisuke. It's common to see the five of them now lounging by the porch steps around afternoon, laughing and just making fun of each other. The new routine kept her mind off things a little.

As for Okita...

He followed what she wanted by leaving her alone. In the rare moments that they met eye to eye, he was always the one who broke their connection first. He never tried to approach or talk to her again. Not that he had much of a chance anyway to account for with the

amount of time he was spending with his lover.

It was now generally accepted by everyone that he and Hotaru were together. Because of the girl's new status as the woman of one of the captains, Hijikata's one month deadline for her was waved away. While she was mostly forbidden to go out of her room when she first came to the headquarters, she was now given full freedom to go around the base. Even the lower rank soldiers who lived on the other side of the building were aware of her presence now.

Hotaru had also voluntarily taken command over the house chores like the washing, tea preparation and cooking, causing her to gain more favor from the other captains who didn't particularly like preparing food in the morning. She also aided Yamazaki as the medic of the group and even became the preferred healer of a number of soldiers because of her shy, charming personality.

If there is one thing Akane honestly envied about her, it's her freedom to act like a woman in front of everybody else.

Because try as she might, she can't feel a single shred of hatred over the new girl. She may have wanted her gone briefly during that one night but she can't bring herself to loathe someone who was always nice and smiling at her. What she really admired about Hotaru, however, was that she never acted like she was better than her even though she had the misconception that Okita liked her even before he chose her. For that, in her own, painful way, the girl also earned her favor.

'Akane.'

The racket their group was making suddenly stopped and they all looked up to see Saito standing behind them. Akane suddenly sat straight at his presence.

'Yes, captain?'

'I need to talk to you,' he succinctly said before turning back and walking towards the corner.

She exchanged a brief questioning look with Harada before she stood up from her seat and followed him.

They stopped when they reached a deserted hall. Saito faced him, his usually calm expression in place.

'I need you to escort Sakura and stay with her for a while.'

She tensed at the seriousness in his tone.

'Has something happened?'

'Yamazaki said there is a probability that the remainder of the Shadow group are trying to get back the girls they've kidnapped a month ago.'

Her blood froze in her veins at what he said. 'W-what?'

'This is only a rumor. But we need to cover all possibilities.'

She fell silent, mulling over what he said. She felt worried about Sakura and wanted nothing else but to protect her. On the other hand, she also felt doubtful about her capability to do that. Deciding against her instinct, she decided to voice out her opinion.

'Wouldn't it be wiser if she's guarded by someone else? Heisuke perhaps?'

Saito shook his head.

'She would be safer if her guard stays with her inside the house. Heisuke cannot do that. We will be sending some of our soldiers to watch over the other victims inconspicuously but since you are a friend of Sakura, there is no point that we don't use you to ensure her safety.'

She felt herself swallowing through her dry throat.

'How long should I stay with her?'

'Two days.'

She nodded her head slowly. Two days. Just two days. Yes, I can manage that, she thought to herself.

'One more thing. You are not allowed to tell anyone about this mission. Especially Sakura. Just tell her you feel like staying with her for a while. That the vice-commander gave you a break.'

She found herself nodding at the look of intensity in her captain's eyes.

'Yes, captain,' she answered with the steadiest, most serious voice she can muster. Saito gave a final nod of his head before turning away. After few steps, he turned to look at her slightly.

'Good luck.'

She found herself smiling and bowed to him, happy that he trusted him enough to do this. Her chronic carelessness and stubbornness was well-known now around the exclusive group of Shinsengumi's high-ranking officers so she didn't expect any particular task to be trusted to her-alone. Apparently, Saito doesn't think the same. He may be cold and too formal most of the time but she felt a connection with him that she did not share with the other members. It's like the relationship between a master and his most loyal student. Straightening from her bow, she turned back, willing to not screw everything up.

\* \* \*

><p>2 days after:</p>

'Are you leaving now, Akane?'

Akane folded the piece of paper Yamazaki wedged on the ledge of Sakura's second floor bedroom window and quickly hid the paper away inside her kimono. She turned around and smiled at the girl who was currently folding linens on the floor.

'Mm-hm. Seems like my vacation's over.'

'Geez, he could have just normally knocked and asked you to come home nicely. He didn't need to act like a ninja all the time,' Sakura shook her head disapprovingly. She laughed a little guiltily and collapsed on the floor beside her. It has been two days ever since she went on to cover this job. Except for a very minor case of young boys throwing rocks at Sakura's bedroom window, nothing else happened during the time she spent inconspicuously guarding her friend.

Deep inside, she felt very happy that she got to spend time with the girl for a long time. She needed a much needed break just laughing and talking to a fellow female without worrying about her actions giving way that she's a girl. It also kept her mind off certain matters that she would pay anything for just to forget even for a little while. Sakura never mentioned anything about him throughout her stay, for which she was thankful for. The bubbly girl simply made sure that she was always laughing and having fun in everything they did.

'Are you sure it's still safe for you to go home at this hour? It's already evening. You can stay another night and just go home early tomorrow!' Sakura looked at her hopefully over the blanket she was folding. She answered with a grimace.

'I wanted to, but I can't. Captain wanted me back now. I'll be in trouble if I don't follow. Anyway, I can handle myself. Believe me, I have sneaked way too much before to even worry now.'

'You bad, bad girl,' Sakura grinned at her devilishly, causing her to laugh.

'So, I have to go now,' Akane stood up from her seat and secured her swords on her waist. Sakura also stood up and gave her a hug.

'The last two days have been fun,' the brunette whispered at her. She smiled and patted her back.

'Yes, thank you very much, Sakura-chan.'

'Mm. I hope you're better now!'

Her smile turned a little sad. 'Yes. I'm...much better, thanks to you.'

Her friend pulled away and held her at arm's length.

'Seriously, a girl like you don't even have to worry about finding a new man. So go on and get yourself one!' the brunette said in a fake patronizing tone.

She gave an earnest laugh at that. As they finally let go and made their final goodbyes, there was only one thing that echoed in her mind again and again.

\_A new man? Maybe in another lifetime.\_

\* \* \*

><p>When she finally reached the headquarters, the place looked deserted already. It was just an hour and a half till midnight and everyone seemed to have finally retired to their own chambers. Akane inhaled the clean evening air and looked at the moon above. It was a full one and it bathed the surroundings with its soft white light. Briefly, she remembered that night a couple of days ago when she stared at the same moon under a sakura treeâ€|<p>

\_No, Akane. Stop it.\_

Before she gets drowned again by memories of that night, she pushed the thought away, sighed and headed for her room.

'You've been sighing a whole lot lately.'

She was so surprised she jumped about a foot and gave a short, shocked yelp. She spun around to see Harada laughing silently at the porch steps.

'Sano-san! You scared me!'

The man only winked and patted the spot beside him. Akane eyed it for a while before finally deciding to sit beside him.

'What are you doing out here? It's late already,' she asked him.

'What are you doing, disappearing for two days and only returning near midnight? Don't you know that's dangerous for girls?' he shot back at her playfully. She suddenly closed her mouth and looked at him a little guiltily.

He gave her a knowing look before he shifted his eyes towards the night sky.

'Ah. Orders from your captain?'

Akane hummed a yes and also trained her gaze at the moon above. 'And you really should stop casually mentioning that I'm a girl, Sano-san. Someone might hear you,' she admonished him with humor.

'What? You're a real girl. What's wrong with that?'

The smile on her lips froze then softened a little into a sad one.

'Well, not everybody knows that.'

Harada looked down at her when he heard the emotion behind her tone. She knew without looking that his light amber eyes were now staring at her with their knowing, warm gaze. After a while, he looked away and stared back at the sky.

'She's beautiful isn't she?' he asked her in a quiet voice.

She didn't even have to ask who he is referring to.

'Yes. Very.'

'Very good at cooking. Shinpachi said one time when she cooked that

fish that he would marry her if only Souji didn't have her.'

She smiled at that.

'Yes, she's a good cook.'

'Very feminine and knows chores around the house. A good medic too. She has all the qualities you'll need in a wife,' he said casually.

Akane felt a sharp pain flash quickly through her chest.

'She would make a wonderful wife.'

The two of them fell silent for a while. Harada was the one who broke it with a question she expected the least from him.

'Do you ever feel jealous of her, Akane?'

Akane started on her seat and stared at him in shock. Harada merely looked at her with a solemn expression on his face that said he was really expecting an answer from her.

'Do you ever feel jealous that she can do things you are not allowed to do?'

It took her a while to finally respond. When she finally did, her voice sounded a little weak.

'Yesâ€| I doâ€|'

'Well you shouldn't be.'

She stared at the steps bathed by the moonlight below her. The light shifted a little and a cold breeze wafted through the yard.

'Why? She's perfect.'

She heard him give a sound almost close to exasperation.

'Why? Okay, why don't we count the ways? Let's see. She is very feminine yes. But can she use a bow and arrow like a skilled hunter? Probably not. Will she be able to risk her life and fight beside barbaric men? Not really. Is she hard headed enough to actually defy the demon vice-commander? I doubt it.'

She laughed at him lightly as he ticked off the reasons with his fingers.

'You make me sound more horrible than I really am.'

He only grinned at her and leaned back on his elbows.

'The point is, you shouldn't be jealous.'

'Why? Because I act like a man and have a hard head?'

'No. Because she isn't you.'

She stopped at that. Slowly, she looked at Sano who was now staring

at a wild rose flowering on the thorn bush beside the steps. She tried to find words to counter him but found none. There was a sure expression on his face that said he can be countered with all the wisest arguments in the world yet still emerge victorious. Her heart throbbed at how much he believed in her.

'So, how are you faring lately?' Akane hasn't even fully recovered from his first remark yet when she suddenly felt her heartbeat skip once more. Then, reality settled over her like a heavy blanket. It would be stupid of her to actually tell herself that she didn't know Harada knew what she was going through. She didn't really quite believe him when he randomly announced one breakfast that he was tired of Heisuke's face and asked her to sit beside him instead, or that one moment when he forced Shinpachi to just put off going to Shimabara so the three of them can just stay with her and Sakura one afternoon. In a way, she knew. She just didn't want to admit to herself that someone else managed to see through the silent battle she was trying to win underneath the carefree facade she kept lately. But of course, Harada knew. He always does.

Knowing that lying would be fruitless, she looked straight into the yard ahead and spoke in the steadiest voice she can manage.

'Struggling, but getting better day by day.'

'Hmâ€|and the pain?'

She smiled sadly.

'Still there. I don't think it will be going away soon.'

'How painful is it?'

'Too much that I feel I'm being dragged through hell.'

Harada stopped at her answer. He looked at her with worry in his eyes. She simply stared blankly at the yard beyond, not wanting to meet his gaze.

'But you're fighting.'

'Yes.'

'And you're going to win it.'

Akane laughed but her voice sounded tired and distraught even in her own ears.

'Yes. I hope so.'

Silence once more. He seemed to be thinking of something, processing things on his own. In return, she patiently waited for him to settle them with himself. Among all the captains, she was closest to him. He had always protected her in his own, warm, brotherly way while she trusted him with her life. If there is someone else she would have spoken to about her problem besides Sakura, it would have been him. However, she decided against it because she didn't want anyone else from inside the group to know what happened. Yet now, Akane sat in silence, finally letting him in. When he finally spoke, there was a

tinge of something else she hasn't heard in his voice before.

'Akane.'

'Yes?'

'Look at me.'

She looked up at the slight urgency and seriousness tingeing his tone.

'I don't like seeing you like this.'

She smiled at him. He was really the best guy friend any girl would wish for.

'Thank you Sano-san. I really appreciate it. But don't worry. I'm working through it. In no time I'll beâ€"'

'So I really hope you'll forgive me for doing this,' he whispered so softly she barely caught his words herself.

She suddenly stopped and stared at him.

'What was that?

Words failed her as she felt her body being pulled gently forward. Akane felt the air in her lungs leave her and her eyes go round as big as saucers at the sudden new, warm sensation.

When she finally realized what was happening, it was already done.

Harada Sanosuke had already kissed her.

## 26. Chapter 26: Lies

A/N: It's a Sunday which means it's update time for me. I wasn't really supposed to release this yet because I felt it wasn't on its best form. So sorry, really if it wasn't that good. I REALLY REALLY TRIED. Anyway, I want to thank all those who decided to drop me some reviews on my last few chapters. You're like fuel for me to always continue this.

P.S. The amazing gozita-san, who is also a brilliant Hakuoki fanfic writer on this site made a video about our favorite first division captain. Go check it here: [watch?v=C5jzYsZR\\_NU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C5jzYsZR_NU). It's really cool. Well then, enjoy!

\* \* \*

><p>A soft whisper of wind danced over the moonlit washed yard, ruffling the leaves and the grass. From the heavens, a cloud shifted, causing the shadows on the ground to lengthen and dance. Akane stared unblinkingly at them, her eyes wide and unseeing.</p>

Despite the chill of the breeze biting at her skin, her face felt warm as if she just spent hours out in the sun. Blood was thundering

in her ears in tune with the erratic beating of her heart. A blow of warm breath fanned over her face and she realized again what's happening.

Harada Sanosuke. Strong, kind, protective Harada was holding her close, his lips grazing her skin. He was holding her so gently that for a moment she forgot she was a girl who wields bows, a girl who was currently dressed with the blue haori of the Shinsegumi. He was holding her as if she was someone breakable and fragile. As if she was just an ordinary girl.

Akane felt as if the breath got stuck on her throat and knocked out of her at the same time. She was so in shock she didn't even realize the edges of her vision were already blurring after minutes of not breathing. A lot of things were running in her mind that did and did not make sense. There was a flash of a smile, of a moon peeking behind the branches of a sakura tree, of a girl crying for help underneath rubble, of a smirk she knew so well, and of eyes. Startling mischievous green eyes that for some reason started to lighten in color until they were finally transformed into kind, gold orbs.

A creak on the wooden floor was what finally shook her to awareness. It also seemed to have the same effect on Harada since he finally pulled back a little and stared at her with his amber gaze. He answered her open, confused look with an expression so kind she nearly stood up and ran away from him. But Akane felt no strength in her body so she just remained sitting there, her face full of questions.

'You don't deserve this.'

She stiffened at his words.

'It's unfair for you. No matter how you look at it.'

She opened her mouth to say something then closed it again in a snap. A sharp, throbbing pain had already formed on her chest and she felt close to fainting. Harada leaned back a little but kept his hold on her elbow.

'Breathe, Akane.'

Air rushed out between her lips as she finally released the breath she had been holding for minutes. Akane briefly dropped her eyes to the hand holding her before looking again at the man in front of her.

'Youâ€¢|' she started in a low whisper.

'I know everything. You were a good actress but not good enough to fool me. I know you've been suffering for the past month. And I am aware of the reason.'

'That'sâ€¢|I'm notâ€¢"' she tried to answer but found herself collapsing into silence again. What was she going to say anyway? That she's okay? She may be trying to forget but she still had some decency left in her not to lie to herself. That was the best she can do.

'I'm really sorry, Akane. I really wanted to protect you but I couldn't do much while watching from the distance. I kind of hoped it will go away if we just let it be. Turns out it didn't. So I'm sorry if I only acted now.'

Her heart jumped at what he said. Then came the gripping need to say something. She didn't know how to say it or what she wanted to say in the first place. All she knew was that she needed to say something. Anything.

'Sano-san, Iâ€"'

Before she can even utter another word, the captain lightly put his finger on her lips in a gesture to silence her. Heat fleetingly flashed on her cheeks at the motion and she watched in a trance as Harada started inching close to her again. Panic shot through her veins as he came closer and closer. Before she can even close her eyes to brace herself for what she thought was another kiss, however, he stopped mere centimetres from her ears. His breath fanned her skin warmly for a moment before he finally broke the tension with a soft whisper.

'Consider it a gift from me.'

That was all he said before he pulled away again, gave her a gentle smile, stood up gracefully, and started walking away.

Akane stared after him, shocked and confused beyond words. She was so puzzled and overwhelmed that she did not even realize she raised her hand on the spot where his lips touched her skin earlier, fingers grazing over the area which seemed to tingle with warmth. Sanosuke, her cooking partner and friend had just kissed her. And she didn't do or say anything about it while he was still in front of her. No. She just looked at him and willed him to say the words that she did not have the courage to say.

She did not know how long she stared off at the spot where he had finally disappeared. It may have been seconds, minutes, even hours. It was only when the sting of the night air finally sank deep under her skin that she finally decided to make a move and stand up from her seat by the stairs. Akane forced her feet to move one after the other, feeling that she was experiencing an out of body experience with every step she took.

She was concentrating too much in gaining back her emotional and physical balance that the sound of a door being ripped open slowly registered into her muddled mind. When she finally realized what was happening, it was too late â€"again.

For the second time that night, Akane felt her body taken hold of by strong arms. This time though, the grasp was strong and harsh as she was dragged into the darkness of a room. She briefly noted the sound of the door being harshly closed before she felt her body pushed roughly against a wall. The sensation was followed by the dull sound of hands slammed forcefully on either side of her head and the warmth of a body just mere inches from her own.

Everything was bathed in shadows except for some few areas in the room where slivers of moonlight from the outside passed through. Everything was dark but Akane found her eyes widening as she

recognized the green, stormy eyes glaring at her from the dimness.

\* \* \*

><p>When Okita finally reached the headquarters, every single muscle in his body were protesting and screaming with pain. It didn't also help that there was a faint trace of headache already forming on the back of his head, just below the juncture where his neck met his skull. He stifled a frustrated growl as the image of Hijikata flashed through his tired mind.</p>

The demon vice-commander had bombarded him with missions the last month and this last one he just finished was the final straw. Somehow, he seemed to be putting all the brunt of work on him even though there were nine other captains he can order around. Thumb grazing over the rough handle of his sword, he slipped towards the back stairs of the house and made his way into his room. He couldn't let anyone know that he'd been out. Tomorrow though, he will finally tell the man to back off. He had finished everything he asked for and he wanted nothing more of his orders anymore.

As he silently treaded the deserted halls, his eyes wandered to one of the doors on his left. A crease formed on his forehead when he realized whose room it is. Without realizing it, he slowed down his steps and stopped just in front of the shoji screen.

Okita just stood there for a moment, staring silently at the door as the wind blew his hair around his face. He knew Akane was also out on a mission for the last few days. If there is another person who seems to be getting a fresh wad of attention from the vice-commander besides from him, it was her. Her patrols with Saito increased over the last month and her practice sessions with her captain always lasted until evening. The only brief moment that he sees her besides mealtimes is when she hangs out with some of the captains and her friend, Sakura, by the porch. When night falls again, she is either sent for patrol once more or found practicing on the dojo.

Probably it's her way of dealing..

Something shot through his system that made him ball his hands briefly into fists. They never talked about that night and the morning that followed. In fact, they never talked about anything at all. For the past weeks all they did was ignore each other as if they were mere strangers. There were no longing looks and secret glances. They simply acted as if they both didn't exist.

Despite his wish to just stay there and stare at the door, Souji pushed himself to turn around and started walking again. He was tired and just barely clinging to his sanity for the day. Who knows what he could do when he stayed in front of her room? He barely took five steps forward, however, when he was stilled again by the sound of voices just around the corner. He momentarily stopped on his spot when he recognized one of the speakers.

'So, how are you faring lately?'

Okita frowned at Harada's voice. Around this time in the evening, he is usually out with Heisuke and Shinpachi, raising hell in Shimabara. He was just about to take another step and casually call out to him when a new voice completely stopped him on his tracks.

'Struggling, but getting better day by day.'

He felt his stomach clench when he realized who it was and what the conversation was about. He wanted to turn away and do the right thing but instead made himself slip into the shadows and lean on the door of the room just beside him. He couldn't see them but their shadows were clearly reflected on the floor just before his position.

'Hmâ€|and the pain?'

Silence. He felt a knot on his chest start to form as he waited for her answer.

'Still there. I don't think it will be going away soon.'

'How painful is it?'

'Too much that I feel I'm being dragged through hell.'

Even from a distance Okita felt Harada freeze at her answer. Unfortunately for him, the effect was much worse. He continued staring at the shadows of the two, unable to blink or breathe.

'But you're fighting.'

'Yes.'

'And you're going to win it.'

A fleeting, broken laugh floated in the air. It was so full of sadness and uncertainty that it caused some cracks on his current stupor. The knot on his chest tightened as he remained riveted on his spot.

'Yes. I hope so.'

There was a brief silence as the two seemed to mull over things on their own. When Harada finally spoke, he did not miss the change on his tone despite the current fog on his mind.

'Akane.'

'Yes?'

'Look at me.'

One of the shadows shifted as Akane slightly turned to face the man beside her. She seemed to be also startled at the sudden change on Harada's voice.

'I don't like seeing you like this.'

'Thank you Sano-san. I really appreciate it. But don't worry. I'm working through it. In no time I'll beâ€"'

'So I really hope you'll forgive me for doing this.'

He didn't know what told him about what was going to happen next. He just knew it in his gut. Knew that even if he tried, it would be too late for him to stop it.

'What was that?'

For a split second he felt as if he was physically stabbed by something right in the middle of his chest. He was no longer alien to cuts and bruises and this one felt so real to the point that he could even feel the eerie coldness of steel digging to his flesh. As he watched the two shadows merge, he felt the invisible dagger go deeper and deeper until finally, he could no longer breathe. He can feel his system shutting down, numbness and cold mingling with the pain.

He didn't know how long he stayed like that. When his eyes focused again, Harada had long been gone. There was only one shadow being reflected on the floor he was still staring at. Akane was still sitting by the stairs, her small form clearly showing her confusion over the situation. Slowly, he watched as she raised her hand to touch her lips.

That one small movement was all it took for him to fully break free from his state. Something had started rising inside him that felt entirely new to him. The feeling was something close to what he always felt just before he was about to pounce for the kill except this time, it was magnified a thousand fold. It was so heavy and pure he almost tasted it on his tongue. He watched with an eerie sense of calmness as the shadow stood up, stopped for a moment, and finally turned to walk away.

Light footsteps started sounding towards his direction. Before he even put enough thought on what he was doing, his hand was already around the arm of the girl who just walked into him. He heard her soft gasp as her body tumbled against his own. Before she collapsed on her feet, his other hand tore open the door behind him and he dragged them both into darkness.

\* \* \*

><p>Akane stared wide-eyed at the green eyes currently glaring at her. She hadn't gotten over her initial shock yet but here she was again, thrown into a situation that didn't make sense to her. Okita was staring at her with an intensity she never saw in his eyes before. It wasn't something that he wore even while he was angry or out for a mission. He just looked at her with a storm of emotions fleeting through his eyes, none of which were making sense to her.</p>

The set of his features told her that he was beyond angry. No, he was even beyond loathing. The air rolling off of him made the air sizzle with tension and she felt a soft hum of fear and worry for him spread throughout her body as her eyes locked with his.

'O..Okita-san?' she whispered softly, her voice small and scared.

A look flitted over his features. When it finally passed, his glare on her seemed to have deepened even more.

'Call me by my first name,' he said in a voice so low gooseflesh erupted on her arms.

She blinked in confusion.

'W-what?'

He leaned even closer to her, causing her to fall back even more against the wall. It took her everything not to whimper when she felt her back hit the cold surface. She was trapped.

'You can't do it?' he asked, his warm breath fanning her lips.

'What's gotten into you?'

'Do it, Akane!'

Akane closed her eyes as he forcefully hit the spots on the wall beside her head where his hands were currently caging her. His words were like a whip, cold and demanding. Her heart seemed to have gotten stuck and was trying to free itself from her throat.

In front of her, Okita remained silent as he waited for her response. She didn't dare open her eyes to look at him. After a while, she heard him shift as he leaned back a little.

'You wouldn't do it, right? You wouldn't call anyone by their first name except for him.'

Akane suddenly opened her eyes and stared at him in shock. His voice, angry and menacing just a few seconds ago sounded flat and emotionless now. His face, however, remained hard as he looked at her.

'What on earth are you talking about?' she whispered harshly out of pure confusion. If it wasn't for him still cornering her by the wall, she would have already collapsed at the turn of events around her. First was Sano. Now this. She was already stretched too tight and she was barely clinging on to the very little control she had over her emotions.

'What's your relationship with him?'

As she processed his words, everything started to make sense to her. It did not take long for the look of confusion on her face to be replaced with a hard mask just like his.

'That is none of your business,' she answered back with the coldest tone she could muster. Okita's face darkened at her response and his eyes took on a dangerous gleam. She simply raised her chin and set her jaw.

'Just answer me.'

'I don't answer to anyone, especially to you,' she growled back at him.

'Just tell me what I want to know!'

'No!' she shot back through gritted teeth. If this was any other day, she would have slunk back and shivered in fear at the anger in his

voice and face. But no. Right now, all it did was make her so angry she was nearly shaking. It was unfair, she thought. She struggled-is still struggling, as she picked up the shards of herself little by little. Yet now, he was here in front of her, threatening to break down again the very little progress she had made.

She wouldn't let him.

'Youâ€œ! You don't have the slightest right to ask that from me. Do you know how hard it is for me every day? Do you have any idea how hard it is to deal with you every time I see you? Every single muscle in my body was telling me to leave this place because of this mess but I didn't! You know why? Because in the end I still couldn't bring myself to leave you!'

Anger and pain pushed her to take a step forward. She was shaking again and she didn't try to stop or hide it. She didn't stop advancing until Okita was finally forced to drop the arms caging her on his sides.

Words were tumbling out of her mouth one after the other. Akane didn't even care anymore that tears were flowing freely on her cheeks now. She didn't give a damn that her voice shook with every little pain she was now letting loose. She probably looked like a total mess because in front of her, Okita's hard exterior finally melted into a slightly worried one. Still, she continued on.

'I should hate you, do you know that? I was so convinced that night while I was waiting for you on that sakura tree that you felt the same way even for just a little. That you cared for me at the very least. But I couldn't have been more wrong.'

'Akaneâ€œ'

'You know what's worse though? That no matter how hard I try, I couldn't hate you. For the first time in my life I felt genuinely angry at one person and I still ended up not bringing myself to hate him even if that would have helped me cope easily. I just couldn't do it,' she said, her voice breaking even as she tried her best to keep her sobs from it. 'I love you that much.'

Okita stilled at her last statement and stared at her speechless. He just stood there, his hands still raised from his efforts to touch her. Akane just stared back at him blankly, suddenly spent and drained. When she finally realized he won't be making another move any time soon, she gave a short and sad laugh, shook her head, and tried to move away from him.

She honestly thought she would be able to finally escape from him when she passed his frozen form. Before she can even reach the door, however, she felt his hand hold her arm again.

'Wait.'

She didn't look back.

'Aren't you even going to listen to me?'

Akane kept her mouth shut. He waited for her to answer but she didn't budge. When he finally realized she didn't have any plans of

acknowledging him, she heard him give a frustrated sound that grated on her nerves. Still, she remained silent, using everything she has to stop herself from facing him and yelling at him again.

'Do you know how unfair you are right now?'

That was the final straw. Her self-control snapped and she spun around, her words already ready. Despite her sudden movement, however, his hold on her arm remained.

'I am unfair? I am the one being unfair now? Can you even hear what you're saying?!"

'You wouldn't even give me a chance to talk.'

'Let go of me!'

He merely tightened his hold on her. She was already beyond mad.

'Let go of me before I punch you in the--'

She wasn't able to finish what she wanted to say.

The moment she gave a huge tug of her hand to free it from his grasp, Okita pulled her back almost effortlessly, causing her to fly straight into his arms. Then, he spun her around, her body slamming again to the wall she just vacated earlier. Before she can even take another breath, something happened that made her forget to breathe altogether.

He kissed her.

\* \* \*

><p>It was not gentle like Harada's. In fact, it was the exact opposite. It was rough. Desperate. And angry. Akane felt her heart stop beating altogether as she felt his lips claim hers. Time entirely stopped for her in that moment and for a long time there wasn't a room, a door, and slivers of moonlight playing on the floor before her. There was only him and her.<p>

If there was one moment she would be willing to sacrifice everything for just to make it last a little bit longer, this would be it. Just one movement. Just one very small movement and the pain she had felt in the last couple of weeks were suddenly gone, as if they hadn't existed at all. She was finally there, safe and sound with him.

Akane started to close her eyes and relax her frame at the current slew of emotions she was feeling. Okita seemed to have felt her finally let go as she heard a very faint sound of approval from him before he pulled her closer to him even more. His other hand fell to her waist while the other wrapped around her wrist and held it firmly against the wall. She almost let herself smile against him when he shifted again and caused their clothes to rustle audibly.

It was over too soon.

That sound was all it took to drain the warmth out of her in a

second. Behind her closed lids, flashes of voices and images erupted like fireworks, bright and glaring and loud. There was a girl with red hair handing him tea, smiling and laughing at him with her light, gentle voice. There was an image of a dark yard and a hushed voice telling someone that he will not leave her. There was a rustle of clothing as one body was pulled into another.

Akane opened her eyes in shock. Then, like she was holding on to something burning hot in her hands, she suddenly pushed Souji away from her.

Okita, unprepared of her sudden movement, didn't get the bearings to hold on to her. He fell back a little, his face showing nothing but pure confusion.

'Oh god. Oh my god,' Akane whispered harshly, her eyes trained on the floor in front of her. There was a horrified look on her face. 'What have I done?'

'What's wrong?' Souji asked in a confused tone. Her head snapped up to him and she glared at him with the intensity of all the self-loathing she was feeling.

'What's wrong? We kissed!'

He still looked as if he can't find the mistake in the situation. Akane took a step forward him, her whole body shaking. There were fresh tears brimming on her eyes now.

'What were you thinking! Whyâ€"why did you do that?!"

Okita was just about to answer her when he closed his mouth halfway and stared at her more closely. In a heartbeat, the confused look on his face was replaced by a grim look.

'I was under the impression that you liked it as much as I do,' his voice had taken the low, dangerous timbre again.

'Oh you enjoyed it? How do you think Hotaru will enjoy it when she finds out about this!'

'I told you, things are not what you think they are.'

'I understand enough to know that you tried to use me to betray someone else who, as far as I know, has been nothing but good to you!' she pointed an accusing finger at him. She felt a painful hole in her chest much like the one she had when she heard him tell another girl that she wasn't important. The only difference now is that the hole was bigger, more gaping, and raw.

In front of her, Okita's glare on her intensified. He seemed to be fighting the urge to yell back at her with everything he had. He was only barely succeeding.

'Why wouldn't you trust me on this,' he asked through gritted teeth.

'Why won't you just leave me alone!'

Her last sentence seemed to have finally gotten the best of him. His

eyes widened for a moment before he finally burst.

'Because I can't! Damn it, do I really need to say it out loud to you? I'm in love with you, Akane!'

Time froze in that moment.

Akane's heart stilled just as his last words escaped his lips. He is... what? Surely this couldn't have been happening. She must have heard wrong. She took a step back and looked him in the eyes to see if he was joking in any way. The expression in his face made her stomach drop. There was not a trace of mirth in them. There was only desperation and pain.

'I don't even know how it happened. It just did. Do you think you are the only one who got thrown into this mess? You have no idea what you've done to me,' he continued, the same desperation evident on his voice. For a brief moment, Akane wasn't seeing the first captain of the Shinsengumi or the gifted samurai anymore. She was just looking at a confused, distressed man in front of her.

'Do you think you can just walk in on someone's life and change things? Because that is definitely what you did. I was already there, Akane. My whole life-everything was already mapped out for me. I was already at that point where I was certain of everything I wanted to do. But then you came along and messed all those up. You didn't have a right to do that to me.'

She fell back on the wall and leaned on it for support. Every word he said fell to her with a force that shook her being. As she stared at him, she found herself looking at her same confused self when she realized she loved him. Everything he said was all she wished for ever since she came to terms with her feelings and now she was finally hearing it. Yet even though her heart tried to soar with happiness, she still felt it being weighed down by pain. She felt happy because she knew in the look in his eyes that he's telling the truth yet hurt because she was also aware of one very important thing she just couldn't overlook.

'B-Butâ€|Hotaruâ€|' Akane gasped, finally voicing out the name of the person that has been lurking behind her fogged mind. Okita, on the other hand, didn't seem to be as concerned as her. In fact, his face slid into an even grim look at the sound of her name.

'There is no Hotaru. There is no me and her,' he said in an emotionless voice. Amidst the blur of feelings already churning within her, Akane found herself struggling to understand what he meant.

'Whatâ€|what do you mean?'

Souji closed his mouth and set his jaw. He didn't seem fond at all to talk about the subject. A few moments after though, he finally spoke.

'I had orders from Hijikata to keep an eye on her the night after we rescued her from that building. She is a spy.'

Akane felt her mouth open at this revelation. With the number of things that has happened to her in just a span of a few hours, she

couldn't bring herself to question this latest information revealed to her. She just stood there listening to everything as he continued to tell her the story.

'He needed someone with enough excuse to watch over her and he found his chance when the girl showed interest in me. Faking that I felt the same way towards her gave me all the access I needed to investigate. Only Hijikata and I knew of this. Even Kondou-san was unaware of it. The woman was as sharp as a knife so we tried our best to keep the secret strictly contained.'

Akane leaned back and placed more of her weight against the wall, trying her best to fight the nausea that was suddenly in danger of overtaking her. One look at him and she knew he was telling the truth. A lot of things have happened all at the same time and she didn't have the facilities to process all of them properly.

When Hotaru came into the picture, her life turned a complete 360 degrees. Now...this revelation was telling her that the reason for all her pain was just a secret mission. That there wasn't really truth behind everything that made her suffer for the last month.

\_Waitâ€|if this was just an order from the vice-commander, then that meansâ€|\_

As tired and drained and spent that she is, Akane found her head snapping up towards Okita's form again. When their eyes met, she knew he also understood what she just realized. Everything. Everything was just a lie.

And he was the only truth.

Her heart soared so much she was rendered speechless again.

He said he's in love with her.

He's in loveâ€|with her.

And there isn't any woman she needed to consider now.

Akane was just about to point that out to him when she realized there was something wrong. Souji was still looking at her with the same anguished look in his face. She opened her mouth to say something but he suddenly cut her off.

'But none of that matters now, right?' It was only a whisper but his question seemed to ring in the room.

\_Whatâ€|?\_

'Because you're already his.'

Akane's eyes widened as she realized what he was trying to say. Words and thoughts suddenly flooded her already strained consciousness and she struggled to let them out. To tell him that he was wrong. To her chagrin, her body didn't seem to be participating with her at that moment. She opened her mouth to tell him the truth but no words came out of her. For Okita, she must have looked like someone who didn't have anything to say to negate him. As she slowly straightened from

her position, he gave her a sad smile that made something inside her break again for an entirely different reason.

Time seemed to slow down agonizingly for her as she watched him turn around and walk towards the door. Akane raised her hand to stop him but he wasn't able to see it anymore.

\_Wait. Wait!\_

'Soujiâ€"'

He didn't hear her call him. When his name finally fell out of her lips, he had already opened the door and slipped halfway out of it. The room was suddenly filled with a white glow as the moonlight slipped inside. Then it was gone again as he shut the door gently behind him.

He didn't close it with force. Somehow though, the sound of it closing still echoed within the four walls of the small room like a shout.

\* \* \*

><p>Footsteps rang in the still and lank hallways of the building, confident and assured. A person clad in a heavy wooden cloak traversed the stone floor with a bearing that would rival any royal. Turning the corner on the left, the image of two men with white hair welcomed the stranger's sight. The monsters had red glowing eyes that burned against the darkness that shrouded the surroundings. After regarding the scene for a moment, the person continued walking towards their direction; eyes narrowed a little in an effort to assess their hold on sanity from the distance. The men bared their fangs at the cloaked figure as it approached but remained on their positions until it stopped just at an arm's length away from them. Pale white hands raised and rested on the hood of the cloak and let the fabric fall away with a flick.<p>

The men's eyes suddenly widened in fear and recognition as they finally realized who the person was. Slowly, the pair backed away and separated to provide a way towards the heavy wooden door behind them. The person regarded it silently as one of the rasetsus pushed it open. Then the figure marched forward into the room without even sparing a look back.

Inside, a man was sitting hunched on a table, busying himself over the many bottles that littered his desk. He only looked up when he finally heard the heavy wooden door of the room slam shut with a resounding echo. When his eyes finally met the figure standing in front of him, he suddenly stood up from his seat, causing his chair to topple back and crash to the ground, and quickly bent for a low bow.

'General,' he whispered in a rugged voice. The person merely regarded him silently for a moment before heading towards one of the low stone tables lining the edges of the room.

'Updates?' the cloaked figure asked softly as it ran a finger over the rough, stone surface. The man straightened from his bow and secretly ran a hand over his forehead to wipe the sweat that suddenly broke out from it.

'The medicine is still the same. I have tried adjusting the solution levels and tried it on a few stray men our soldiers found in the woods. Unfortunately, they ended up just the same as our regular ones.'

'Hmâ€|'

'I will be trying a few more techniques and see if there are any differences. Tomorrow I can give reports on the first few ones I've run today.'

'I seeâ€|and our guestâ€|?'

The man gulped before answering. His heart was beating more erratically now and he braced himself to face the worse after giving his last report. After a few seconds, he finally spoke up.

'Iâ€|have not touched him since three days ago.'

In a flash, the head of the general snapped towards his direction. He nearly jumped in fear and silently cursed his nerves. He didn't waste another breath and plowed on to continue his explanation.

'I-I have noticed some changes in his system. He was improving even if we leave him be. His rate of healing has increased over the last few days so I decided to stop giving him treatments. I had a feeling our efforts might cause his normal recovery to slow down.'

The person's stiff stance melted a little at what he said. The man blew out a deep breath, not even trying to hide his relief. Something told him that he was already safe. Well at least, for now.

'If that's the caseâ€|then that's good news. How long do you suppose it'll take him to make a full recovery?'

'Maybe three to five days at the most.'

The person smiled in the darkness, a gesture that seemed to cause the light from the candles to waver as it flickered against the shadows in the room.

'Perfect,' a voice full of dark glee slipped out of slightly upturned lips.

He couldn't help but be curious at the response. Clearing his throat, he mustered all his strength to voice out his question.

'If you don't mind me asking, General, what is our next plan of action?'

The person regarded him for a moment before letting out a soft thrill of laughter. Then, he watched as the figure raised itself lithely to sit on the stone table it was leaning on earlier. He caught a flash of skin as his leader leaned back and crossed long, lean legs languidly in front of him.

'Nothing. We've done everything on our part. Now, we wait.'

The candlelight shifted and threw its light to bright, gleeful eyes

and flowing hair that burned even redder in the fire.

## 27. Chapter 27: Fated Together

A/N: Okay, so i know I've been away for so long. To tell you the truth, I was lacking the resolve and the push recently to continue writing. Then again, i received an anonymous comment telling me that he/she misses this story and I realized it would be unfair for me to just stop this. In my head, this story has already been finished and concluded, but well, what is the point if i can't share it with you, right? So here it is. I do warn you though, this chapter is a little too choppy. But then again, it has been sitting on my computer now for almost two weeks and i know i gotta finish it and release it one way or another. I literally had to repeat watching season 1 again and devoured every art i can see just to get the creativity to do this! So I hope you enjoy it. I really really love Akane and the others, mind you. It's just that sometimes, words literally evade you.

P.S. For the anonymous person who said she misses the story, thank you! You were part of the reason i was able to finish this.

\* \* \*

><p>Soft sunlight filtered through the leaves and washed the ground with a soft glow. From around the place, the unmistakable songs of the resident morning animals started their chorus to herald the perfect morning. The sky was clear and the weather seemed perfect. Not too hot and not too cold. It seemed to be the start of a great day.</p>

Pity not everyone in the headquarters of the Shinsengumi thought the same way.

Akane slumped in her futon for the hundredth time. She watched the shifting rays of sunlight on the floor with a blank expression and absent-mindedly heaved a sigh. Barely 24 hours ago, her life was complicated. Now, it was a mess. She didn't even think that things can take a turn for the worse for her. She was suffering from a broken heart, struggling to overcome her own demons, and accept things as they are. Who would have thought that in barely 8 hours she'd discover that everything she'd grovelled over by the past month was merely a plot, be kissed by two men, confessed to, and then get turned down again because of a misunderstanding?

Memories of the previous night flashed in her mind again and she found herself frustratingly tugging at a stray lock of hair that has fallen over her face. She hadn't slept a wink and she spent majority of the night alternating from pacing back and forth to collapsing again in her futon. Her eyes felt heavy and tired but her nerves were so on fire that she can't even stay still in one position for too long. There are too many things she wanted to do and say at the same time and it was killing her that she can't act on it.

\_ 'Do I really need to say it out loud to you? I'm in love with you, Akane!' \_

Akane felt heat flash through her chest and buried her face in her blanket. She should have been happy. If this was any other normal situation, she should have been celebrating right now. She had zero

experience in the romance department but she knew from the stories of Rika and Suzume that being in love shouldn't be like this. It should have been all fuzz and warmth. Not a roller coaster ride riddled with nightmares. A confession shouldn't have been made in a dark room with both of the people involved on the edge of their sanities. It should have been under the moonlight, under the sakura blossoms with smiles and not tears.

Why couldn't she have that?

Sighing to herself again, she raised her arm and covered her eyes with it. Until now, she couldn't believe what he said to her. Truthfully, she's still having doubts if she heard things right or if that confrontation even happened in the first place. It was just so surrealâ€|so unbelievable to the point that it seemed to have been part of a time that was detached from reality.

\_This isn't reality. I am detached from reality\_. She told herself ruefully as she realized that the very life she was living right now can very much not be real. This isn't her world. For all she knows, she can be taken away any moment and transported back home. She might even be living on borrowed time.

She was so immersed in her thoughts that she nearly missed the sound of footsteps that started echoing in the hallways. One was light and steady while the other one was lazy and almost dragging.

"Souji, why do you want to train this early?"

Akane's eyes snapped open when she heard the unmistakable voice of her captain say the name. She didn't know if it was just her imagination but she thought he sounded a littleâ€|disgruntled. Saito was an early riser. He was probably always the first one who wakes up among the division heads. Still, she knew this was a little too early for him. The sun had just risen and the air still held some of the humidity of dawn.

"No reason at all. Since when have you been so against training, Hajime-kun?"

The voice that haunted her all night made her sit up from her futon in a rush. Okita's voice sounded hoarse and despite of the humor in it, she can clearly hear the tinge of tiredness in his tone. Had he also slept? Did he also spend the whole night thinking just like her?

"I am not against it. Still, this is not normal for you. Did something happen?"

"Ehhhâ€|nothing. I woke up early and couldn't go back to sleep. Stop asking questions. It's troubling."

She watched silently as the shadows of the two finally reached her door. As they passed, she heard Saito give an audible sigh as he gave up on the topic.

"Have you seen Akane last night? She was supposed to return and report to me but she didn't make an appearance yesterday."

She suddenly froze when she heard her name. She just remembered that

she was indeed supposed to talk to her captain last night after she returned. With all that has happened though, that thought effectively fled her mind. Instead from being troubled by the scolding she was sure to get from him, however, all of her attention and energy focused on the boy he was asking. What will Souji say? Will he tell him he talked to her? Will he tell him what happened? Or will he deny he even saw her last night?

Without meaning to, she found herself edging closer to her door. The two were already on the stairs now and their voices sounded more distant. For a while, there was only silence between the pair. Then she heard him finally answer.

"No, I haven't. Perhaps you should ask Sano-san for that."

The distance between her and the two didn't stop the coldness and steeliness of his tone from echoing in her head. It's like he whispered it right beside her, making sure his words burrow painfully deep in her chest. He didn't sound betrayed or hurt. No. What hurt her was how he said it so dismissively. As if she was nothing more than someone he used to know or even care about.

Probably it was because of the lack of sleep. Probably it was the drama of last night or even the stresses of the past month coalescing into one ball of emotion in her chest. Whatever it is, she felt her system shutting down slowly, as if someone is slowly flipping off the switches of her reasoning and opening something that she held back for so long. She closed her eyes in a weak effort to try and push back the pain that was in danger of overwhelming her being.

Unfair. That's what it is. After spending a whole month silently trying to deal with the hurt, she was now being treated as if she betrayed him. As far as she knows, all she did was try her best to give him what she thought he wanted at first. How was she supposed to know that everything had been a plan? She did everything she can to let him go—even kill a small part of her little by little every day just to ease the pain. Yet now, just because he happened to see him with someone else, he is acting like this? It wasn't even her damn choice that Sano did that. She just sat there while everyone seemed to make all the decisions around her.

Akane sat there against the door, her hands almost shaking from all the emotions rolling through her. She had never felt so emotionally cornered in her life. There was anger, frustration, pain, and that undeniable feeling to make him see things her way—to tell him her part of the story. She tried to control herself but failed. She was too far gone in having reign over her feelings to actually think things through.

You could be taken away anytime. You might even be living on borrowed time.

Those two sentences broke through the mess in her mind and shook her so much her eyes snapped open. It was true. Most of the time she didn't know what was happening around her. Suddenly, she realized how very important every minute of her stay here is. If she wanted to do things, she should do it now.

With renewed passion that's bordering on anger, she stood up from her position, grabbed her sword, ripped open her door and strode out into

the early morning light. She's tired of always fumbling in the dark and waiting for the right moment to come.

It has passed her so many times already; it's about time she gets it herself.

\* \* \*

><p>Souji gracefully dodged an attack from below, maneuvering his body just in time before Saito's wooden sword swiped his stomach. He took a step back then bounced on the balls of his feet to launch himself for an after attack. The two of them immediately started sparring the moment they reached the training grounds. It was just the way things are between them. He did not miss the way the other boy's eyes curiously looked at him when he said that line about Akane and Harada but he seemed content right now to fight him instead. That was one of the things that he liked about the third division captain. Saito Hajime was not a man of many words but he was empathic and sensitive to the things around him. And right now, he knows that a good fight is what he needs.</p>

Their wooden swords met with a resounding thump that echoed in the wide yard. Okita smirked at his partner and pushed his body backwards again before the other can make another move. His blood was already starting to become alive under his veins and his muscles hummed at the movements he knew and mastered so well.

At least that was one thing he got to give himself credit for. He can still move properly despite not having a minute of sleep. He simply spent his time last night staring into the darkness with thousands and thousands of thoughts running in his mind. There was even one point when he almost got up with the intent of storming inside Hijikata's room. Souji understood where the vice-commander was coming from but still, he couldn't stop himself from partly blaming him for the current mess he was in. If he didn't insist in keeping that last mission a secret to everyone, he could have at least told her and stopped-he held back that train of thought as he dropped his body down to evade one deadly strike from Saito. Stop what exactly? Stop her from losing interest? Stop another person from showing interest in her?

'Focus!'

He suddenly caught himself just in time to avoid a sideways swipe from Saito. Cursing internally, he balanced his weight on one foot and retreated a little as he slightly struggled to regain his balance and focus again. Okita hated himself for a while for letting his attention slip. He always seems to do that lately every time he thinks of her. He didn't let his temporary mistake show in his face though and instead threw the other guy his usual confident smirk before launching himself again.

"Okita Sojiro Fujiwara!"

He froze midway from hacking his wooden sword at Saito when a clear, powerful, feminine voice tore the air. His eyes immediately flew to the direction of the sound and slightly widened when he saw Akane striding towards them angrily. Had she just called him by his real name? How did she know that? For a while he was suddenly reminded of the way his elder sister always called him before when he was still

young. Then, the thought quickly fled his mind when he finally took notice of the angry set of her lips and the fire in her eyes. Her hair was in disarray from her tie as if she spent the whole night rolling in bed and she was also carrying her sword. She looked positively frustrated. Like she finally burst after trying to control herself for so long.

Across from him, Saito also stared at the girl in shock, his sword still poised mid-air. It was the first time they ever saw her like this. When Akane finally reached them, the boy actually took a step back to make way for her. Souji watched with a mixture of shock and uncertainty as she pulled out her sword from its scabbard and continued storming towards him. He couldn't help but also retreat a little with the aura she was giving off. When she was only some mere feet away, she threw the sheath on the ground carelessly and turned over the sword so that the blunt edge was facing him. He watched in slow motion as she raised her arm.

And attacked him.

\* \* \*

><p>Akane threw most of her weight on her first attack. Adrenaline was flowing freely in her veins, making her entirely oblivious about the amount of force she was using. Being the skilled swordsman that he is, however, Okita expertly blocked her sword with his wooden one even though his face showed nothing but pure shock. She raised her arm again and struck again, now fiercer than the first one she made. She noticed how he almost so carelessly blocked the hit once more and growled a little in frustration. He didn't even seem to be putting attention to her strikes. He was just staring at her in shock and retreating as she continued to hit him.</p>

'You! You have no rightâ€'' she said through gritted teeth. Thoughts that she was dying to tell him were on the tip of her tongue but there were so many of them that she can't properly express them in her current state. 'You don't have any idea what you've done to me!' she decided to change direction and aimed for his side instead. 'Do you know how hard it is to look at you every single dayâ€''with her and not do anything about it!'

Akane raised her arm and slashed down on him again. Their swords met in mid-air with a resounding clang and she leaned forward to glare at him. 'I tried my best! I tried my best to deal with it for you!'

'Akaneâ€''

'Yet you come one nightâ€'' she struck again, now targeting his chest. 'Push me in a roomâ€'' she hit him to try to get the sword out of his hands. 'Tell me you love meâ€'' she attacked, aiming for his stomach now. 'Then leave because you thought I was already with someone elseâ€'' she launched herself towards him again. '-without even letting me tell you that I also love you!' she finally said as she gave a blow that cracked the wooden training sword.

She was so out of it that she barely noticed the way the eyes of boy in front of her widened noticeably. Emotions danced on their surface, starting from confusion then ending in shock. Okita's forehead creased and he slightly lowered the broken sword.

'Whatâ€¢ did you say?' he asked in a voice that for a while didn't sound like him. His tone was a mixture of confusion and wonder and he looked closer at her with the turmoil of emotions still in his eyes.

Seeing the intensity in his expression almost shook her from her current spell. Truth is, she didn't have any idea of half of what she just said. She was concentrating too much on trying to beat him up that she just let her words flow freely. Now, she almost regretted her outburst as she saw the expression on his face. Automatically, she took a step back while still keeping her sword ready in front of her.

'I won't repeat them again,' Akane tried to say coldly to cover up the sudden change in her feelings. She won't let him know how shaken she suddenly felt. Souji, however, merely took a step near her again, the same expression on his face.

'No. Say it again,' he said in the same tone of voice. He was looking at her differently, as if he was only seeing her for the first time. The way he was studying her was starting to scare her and she took another step back uncomfortably.

'I won't!' she shouted, though her voice came off as shaky and uncertain. To cover up for it, she raised her sword again and tried to hit him. Her eyes widened, however, when he easily dodged it by sliding gracefully a little on the side and taking hold of her arm. His hold was firm and not painful but it did its job on stopping her from moving it again to attack him. His eyes never left hers for a second which only caused her heartbeat to grow even more rapid. She faintly heard the clatter of wood as he carelessly threw his broken wooden sword on the ground.

'Say it again, Akane,' he said in a lower voice as he took another step closer to her. Their bodies were merely a few inches from each other now; his breath fanning her skin as he looked down on her. She involuntarily gulped as she stared back in his eyes. No matter how much she tried, she couldn't look away from them.

'N-Noâ€¢!' she stuttered as she tried her best to stare up at him angrily. Okita, however, merely returned her look with a lazy smirk that slightly curled his lips. Without taking his eyes off her, he slowly raised his other hand and wrapped it around the hilt of her sword. She felt her throat go dry when she felt him tug it effortlessly from her grasp and let it fall to the ground together with his wooden one. She unconsciously swallowed as she felt her last defense go.

To make matter worse, he placed his other arm around her waist and pulled her into him more, further lessening the distance between them. He brought his face closer to her, his lips mere inches from hers now. Her eyes widened at the proximity and she tried to struggle to free herself. He only answered by securing his hold on her more tightly.

'I'm sure you remember what I gave you last night, right?' he whispered to her as he deliberately dropped his eyes to her lips. 'If you don't want me doing that to you again in front of Hajime-kun, you will repeat what you just said.'

Akane could have died right then and there. A small gasp escaped her lips as she remembered that her captain was still there. She still couldn't tear her eyes away from Souji but she can see Saito on the edge of her vision, watching them silently. She swallowed again and tried to give him the fiercest glare she can muster. He only returned it with a smirk. If only she can just move freely, she would have already whacked him in the head with how much he is enjoying this.

'I-Iâ€|Iâ€|' she started to say then closed her mouth again to steady the beating of her heart. She was literally forcing word per word out of her lips. She still hasn't recovered fully on her earlier emotional outburst and yet here she is now stuttering for a whole new different reason. Okita raised his eyebrows at her, silently urging her to continue. She returned it with a glare which he only answered by pulling her even closer.

'W-wait!' she said, struggling as he slowly closed the distance between them. 'I'm going to say it! I'm going to say it, okay?!" she finally shouted, mortally terrified that he will indeed kiss her in the open. Okita merely chuckled and put a small distance between them, making sure that he can pull her in closely easily in case she changes her mind. Akane gave him one last glare before finally sighing and dropping her eyes from him. This was it, she supposed. This was probably the right timing she had every intention of getting earlier.

Heaving another deep breath, she prepared the words she was going to say. How ironic, she thought. She had been waiting for this moment for a long time and now that he is asking for her to finally say it, she wanted nothing more than for the ground to swallow her up. Still, she won't back down. She promised herself she won't let chances pass her anymore. She better continue on that resolution now.

Slowly, she raised her eyes into the green ones of the boy in front of her. As she looked at them, she felt time stop around her once more. It was always that way, she thought. Everything always seem to get stranded in time the moment she gazes at those depths. Suddenly, a rain of emotions started to open up in her chest. It started as a trickle, then it turned into a drizzle, until finally it blasted into a full-fledged storm. Just when she thought she was about to drown on them, light pierced through them-shining, strong, and warm. Akane's heart swelled as she let the warmth finally wash through her. Then, with new found confidence, she finally uttered the words she had been meaning to say for a long time.

'I'm in love with you, Okita Souji.'

\* \* \*

><p>Okita couldn't help but tighten his hold on her as she finally said it. Something seemed to have been lifted from his shoulders all of a sudden and he gave out a breath that he wasn't even aware of holding. For a moment, he just stared into her brown eyes, willing himself to see if she was telling the truth. She lookedâ€|honest. Something warm started to spread from a certain point in his chest to his whole body. It was a strange feeling. He felt a certain heaviness in his chest but not in a bad way. He feltâ€|how was he feeling? Happy? Is this what people call happiness? He feels happy whenever he

wins in a match, he feels happy whenever he manages to annoy the hell out of Hijikata, he feels happy every time he knows he can be of help of Kondou. But this feeling he was having now, it was far too different from the kind that he felt during all those moments.<p>

Despite all the strange sensations, there was a nagging question that spoke to him at the back of his mind. She told him she loved himâ€‘! Steeling himself, he pushed himself to finally ask it. He needed to know the answer to it anyway before he lets himself feel more.

'And Sanosuke?' he asked in a low voice as he unconsciously pulled her closer to him. Barely two minutes since she said those words and he is already feeling this possessive of her, he thought without humor.

Different emotions rolled through her features so fast he wasn't able to catch any of them. Akane's eyes momentarily widened then dropped from his. She seemed to have only remembered what happened last night. For a moment, he felt angry with himself for reminding her of it. He could have just accepted what she said and choose to ignore that. He could have just kept her for himself. Yet he knew he couldn't do it no matter how much he wanted to. He couldn't do it knowing that there is someone else that can possibly make her happy too. It would be unfair to Sano. And to her.

'Sano isâ€‘|he's aâ€‘| '

'Oy! So you finally did it, huh?'

Before she even managed to say it, the two of them turned to see someone grinning at them from the porch steps.

There, just on the top step looking down on them was Harada Sanosuke.

\* \* \*

><p>Akane's heart, soaring just a few minutes ago, pummeled at the sight of the man. He was leaning on one of the banisters quite lazily, his amber eyes dancing as he watched them. For the first time in her life, she didn't know what to do or say. So instead, she just stood there staring at him blankly.<p>

'Sano-san. Ohayo,' she heard Souji say in front of her. Her eyes rounded in shock as she felt him pull her closer to him as he also regarded the man. His voice was light and friendly but she couldn't deny the tinge of seriousness and warning in it.

Harada, however, seemed to be completely unaffected by it. Instead, his smile only grew wider as if there was an inside joke he was trying to communicate to them. Akane's forehead creased in confusion. Why does he look so happy? Uncomfortable silence descended on them, making her fidget in her position. She was slowly starting to feel numb on the waist with Souji still holding it, stopping her to fully face the other man. She even took a peek at Saito who was still watching their party silently for help. Her captain, however, merely continued staring at the three of them, waiting for someone to break the sudden tension.

'You,' Souji suddenly spoke up out of nowhere, effectively tearing her gaze from the other boy. There was a different look on his face now as he stared at Harada. He seemed to look shocked, as if some secret was just revealed to him. Then, ever so slowly, a smile crept on his lips. 'You bastard,' he said again, his voice full of laughter now. Akane felt his hold on her waist loosen a little.

Harada gave a careless shrug, his grin turning into a cheeky one. 'You owe me,' he said, still looking at Okita.

She whipped her head back and forth between the two, completely clueless of what was happening. She gently pushed off from Okita's hold to openly stare at the pair. Both of them were smiling now and almost on the verge of laughter.

'What is happening?' she finally asked, frustrated and a little irritated about not getting the situation. Souji simply gave her an exultant look and crossed his arms over his chest before looking again at the other man.

'You knew I was there,' he said plainly at Harada. It wasn't a question. He stated it as a fact.

'Yes. I heard you come in. So I took the opportunity to show you what you're missing,' the red-haired captain said in an equally amused voice.

'You do know that it was just a mission from the demon, right?'

'I do now. He just talked to us this morning. I actually felt foolish for doing that for a moment. Then againâ€" he nodded his head towards the two of them and chuckled. 'I figured you still needed the push anyway.'

'It was effective.'

Akane stared back at Okita as he said the last line with a little bit more seriousness in his tone. Then, her eyes moved towards Harada once more. She creased her forehead at him in confusion which he answered with a playful wink. Finally, something clicked on her. Then, she understood.

'Consider it a gift from me.'

'Oh noâ€"Oh no, no no. That was a bluff?!" she said, half-screaming, half-groaning. Harada gave her a slightly apologetic look but the smile still didn't leave his face.

'I'm sorry, Akane. I had to do it. Boy needed the push,' he nodded towards Souji's direction. 'And I didn't want to see you like that anymore.'

Despite the irritation that shot through her at the idea of being played, her heart softened towards her friend. He does care for her. Immensely. He cares for her so much he even kissed herâ€"

'Though I can't really say I'm entirely happy with what you did, Sano-san. After all, you still kissed her.'

Her train of thought was suddenly cut short with the sound of Okita's

voice. She suddenly froze and looked at him slowly. That familiar murderous look was on his face again. His lips were still smirking and his eyes smiling but there was subdued danger brewing just beneath their surface that made the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end.

'O-Okita-sanâ€" '

'Ehhh. But I didn't kiss her. Well, I did, but not on the lips. I'm not heartless enough to steal her first kiss. I wanted to help, not cause trouble,' Sano said dismissively as he leaned back more comfortably against the pole. She whipped her head to him in question which he answered by raising his eyebrows in confirmation. In front of her, Souji also froze momentarily. Then he turned to her.

'Is that true?' he asked in a neutral voice, his eyes all serious again. Akane stared at him as her mind worked in overdrive. Everything that happened last night was a blur of mess in her mind. There were too many emotions and events and she couldn't grasp all of them even if she tried. She did her best to concentrate on her moment with Sano though. After a while, she looked at Okita again and nodded.

'Yesâ€|yes I think so. I think he kissed me here,' she said in wonder and tapped her finger near the corner of her lips. Now that she's concentrating over that moment, she was slowly realizing that he must be correct. She wasn't entirely put on shock yesterday because she was kissed on the lips by Sano. She got simply surprised with the prospect of being kissed as a whole. She was still concentrating too much on reviewing what happened that she failed to notice the way Souji's grin widened into a full blown satisfied smirk.

'So that means I'm still your first kiss last night.'

She choked.

Saito's eyebrows rose at that piece of information while Harada gave an amused whoop from the porch.

'Now that's what a real Shinsengumi captain is like!'

Akane's eyes rounded as big as saucers and her face flushed beet red.

'What are you doing bursting that out!' she said as she took a step towards him. Okita didn't move from his position and instead only looked at her with satisfaction clearly plastered all over his face.

'What? It's the truth. I'm your first kiss,' he then leaned forward, bringing his face closer to hers. 'And you love me too,' he decided to add.

That made her almost explode. Hearing Harada chuckling behind her, she turned and glared at him.

'Sano-san! You are still at fault here!'

The red-haired captain simply put his hands up in surrender. Akane huffed angrily and glared at the two. When they didn't answer and

simply continued grinning at her, she threw her hands exasperatedly in the air.

'I can't believe why I'm still bothering myself with you wolves!' she said before turning on her heels and stomping angrily back into her room. Come to think of it, she thought. Maybe this is the best time for her to be sucked back again into her world after all.

\* \* \*

><p>Okita's smirk softened into a real smile as he watched the girl trudge away angrily. She said she loved him. And there's no one that he should worry about or stop him from giving back those feelings. With a small chuckle, he stooped down to pick up her fallen sword and returned it to her scabbard. He didn't know what he has gotten himself into or what new chapter in his life he just opened. All he knows is that he's happy at the moment and that he isn't regretting finally starting it.</p>

Looking back at Saito, he lazily tipped and leaned the sheathed sword into his shoulder.

'Sorry, Hajime-kun. Looks like our match was disturbed this time,' he said, smirking.

The other boy simply sighed and picked up his broken sword on the ground to return to the practice room.

'You have a very bad habit of dragging me into your mess, Souji. Next time, I won't spar with you until you swear that no wild woman will come attacking in the middle of our fight.'

Okita snickered at what he said. His voice and words sounded dismissive as always but he can't deny the small smile tugging at the other boy's lips. The two of them only needed to briefly look at each other for him to understand what Saito really wanted to say. He's happy for him. With a nod to each other, the two of them parted ways, him towards the direction of the main house and the other to the dojo.

He now walked towards the porch steps where Harada was still waiting, grinning at him. He owes the man a big favor. If it weren't for himâ€¦he probably would still be in the dark now.

'Thank you for the assistance, Sano-san. As always, the expert on women solves things again,' he said playfully as he finally reached him. The other man simply laughed and cocked his head.

'No problem. A night at Shimabara for me, Heisuke, and Shinpachi is a good enough payment.'

He also laughed before nodding at him. 'It was a good act,' he said with a grin before finally turning to the hallway to leave. Just before he can turn the nearby corner, however, he heard him speak again.

'Ah, I forgot to tell you, Souji.'

He turned around to look at him.

'Yes?'

Harada stared at him for a moment. His eyes were still laughing and kind but they now held a hint of undeniable seriousness.

'That kiss? That was the only bluff I made last night. So you better take care of her,' the captain stopped a moment, his smile turning serious too. 'Because my intentionsâ€œI never said they weren't real.'

Okita froze for a while as he digested what he said. Then, he relaxed again, his kind smile turning into a confident smirk.

'Don't worry, Sano-san. I assure you. There won't be any reason for anyone to take her away from me now.'

\* \* \*

><p>A girl sat in a wooden stool, tapping her finger in rhythm with every passing second. The single candle flickering on the table near her occasionally throws its glare on her bright red hair, making it seem alive in the darkness of the dungeon. Her black eyes were focused on the long wooden table bearing something covered in a big blanket. She had been staring at it for hours now, waiting for something, anything to happen. It should be near. That foolish man told her it can be any minute. And she can't wait any more of it.<p>

She was just about to stand up and storm outside to find that foolish doctor when something suddenly shifted in the darkness. It was a very small movement. Anyone not watching close enough would have definitely missed it. However, it was enough to make her highly strung nerves tighten even more. With small, cautious steps, she approached the table, stopping just mere feet away from the covered thing on top of it.

A minute passed. Two.

All of a sudden, something moved so fast from beneath the cloth she nearly stumbled back from surprise. She caught herself just in time for the shape underneath to settle. It was only twitching now. Then it totally stopped.

She took another tentative step forward again. With wide eyes, she watched in wonder as the thing beneath the blanket slowly started stirring again. Like something being pulled by invisible strings, it rose from the bed then stopped when it reached full sitting position. The area was still mostly covered by shadows with the candle being far away but the rustling sounds told her that what she'd been waiting for has already come.

A small smile slowly split her lips. She leisurely dropped to her knees and bowed her head on the floor. The silence in the room did not hide the sound of uncovered feet gently touching the stone paved ground.

'Hotaru.'

Slowly, she raised her head just in time for someone to step out into the shadows. The flickering candlelight threw its glow on black hair

and blood red eyes. He was terrifyingly beautiful.

With manic eyes, she stared into the person standing majestically in front of her.

'Welcome back, Ayato-sama.'

## 28. Announcement

Hello, if you are reading this, it means that you have been following this story for quite a long while. I am deeply thankful for your support. It is any writer's dream to have readers as faithful as you. After much consideration, however, I have decided to finally stop continuing this story. My schedule has been crazy lately and as much as i want to, i couldn't find the time to write any more chapters. So I am sorry, and thank you...

...

...

...

...

OKAY I WAS JUST KIDDING.

I am not going to give up this story, not ever! I am so sorry if it has been a while since I updated. The crazy schedule part was true PLUS I am revising my plot guide. Originally, this story is only supposed to go for 31 chapters only. But because I am a dork, my 20th chapter is now the 24th and if i follow my original plot line that means you have to read a ton of chapters more. Seriously, I do not want to bore any of you so I am revising the remaining chapters right now to make it at least 6. So I am sorry if I am taking time and thank you THANK YOU to everyone who has followed. I swear, every time i see a new one following me I feel guilty because i somehow feel like people are getting tired checking this story every now and then and seeing no updates so they just follow me to be notified. Haha. I am also posting this to make sure that I PUBLISH SOMETHING NEXT WEEK. I have promised user "changing sakura" that I am going to publish a chapter this week but yeah, i don't think I can so here i am being a dork and disturbing all of you as a promise to myself and you that i will publish next saturday. A little pressure on me can bring me a long way, yes.

So if any of you want to talk or abuse me you can talk to me anytime okay. I don't know, I can give you my skype or blog or whatever?

I AM SO SORRY AGAIN FOR THIS POST i know it's pure ranting.

So bye. I'll see you next week.

P.S. I hope Akane and Souji still has a place in your hearts.

-Bellavue-

## 29. Chapter 28: Welcome Home

\_A/N: Wow. How long has it been already? I'm sorry for making all of you wait for so long even though I've promised to post a chapter a week after the announcement I made. Things were really crazy with work and sadly, I temporarily lost my muse. Thankfully, I have it back now (i think). Thank you to all the new followers and those who left comments even though it's been ages since i uploaded. Enjoy!\_

\* \* \*

><p><em>'<em>\_I'm in love with you, Okita Souji.'\_

\*\*\_Thwap.\_\*\*

\_ 'What? It's the truth. I'm your first kiss. And you love me too.' \_

\*\*Thwack!\*\*

'Ow! Oh, oh, that hurts, ughh!'

Muffled grunts of agony faintly rang inside the four walls of the small room as Akane jumped up and down on one foot and cradled her other in her hands. Blowing air to stifle herself from screaming in frustration, she simply settled on glaring at the traitorous kodachi lying innocently on the floor of her room. She had been trying to clean it earlier but a chain of ungraceful moves made it somehow end up brutally hitting her big toe.

It was just an hour or two after sunrise and she was trying her best to distract herself before she goes to breakfast by doing random things like sewing the holes in her haori and cleaning various parts of her room. Unfortunately, her body seemed to not be cooperating with her at the moment and she always ends up injuring herself one way or another.

To make everything worse, she was feeling genuinely sick in the stomach after not eating properly since yesterday morning. Due to the mental toll that had taken over her the last couple of days, she spent the majority of her time yesterday sleeping and hiding in her room, only leaving it for mere minutes to go to the bathroom or get a drink of water. There was even a time when Gen-san actually chased after her on her way to the kitchen out of worry.

Sighing in frustration, she now flopped on the floor and reached out for the fallen sword. She knew what was wrong with her. She was trying to run away from some things and they're messing up with her mentally and physically.

She shook her head and frowned at the sword as she thought over the current emotion brewing inside her. It was not a bad sort of discomfort but a flipping, giddy, light feeling that made her want to both run and just curl into a ball at the same time. They were so raw, she could feel them rolling through her system again with the same exact intensity that she felt them yesterdayâ€"all terrifying and surprising yet still beautiful and perfect in their glory.

A blush crept to her cheeks as she finally let herself remember the

scene from last morning. Saitou staring at her, Harada laughing, and Okitaâ€|No, Souji, looking at her with an expression in his eyes that she had never seen before.

When she attacked him so blindly in the yard, she was not expecting to get any positive results out of her actions at all. All she wanted was to say her side of the story, to tell him how much he had affected her and how stupid he is for even thinking she can be with someone else when she had been looking only at his direction ever since she first set eyes on him.

Yet yesterday morning ended with a sudden and unexpected halt to the story. Finallyâ€| after months of running away from her feelings, they had finally met in the middle.

'\_It's the truth. I'm your first kiss. And you love me too.'\_

Akane bit her lower lip to try to stop herself from dwelling too much on the situation. She can feel her whole face burning nowâ€"something that would bring her more trouble if she showed up looking like that for breakfast. Truth be told, she would have preferred staying inside her room for another day today and avoid all sort of interactions with anyone. She just didn't know how to face the people in the compound right now, especially him. However, she also knew that she couldn't run from things forever. Didn't she just say yesterday that she's now ready to face everything full on? That she's finally done trying to dodge her own emotions?

\_Come on, Akane. What are you even afraid of?\_

Her grasp on her sword tightened as she started arguing with herself in an effort to push some reason and confidence to her system. Didn't she want this ever since the moment she finally realized that she'd fallen for him? How many times had she wanted to steal him away from Hotaru when she thought she lost him? Now that everything is in front of her, why is she running away like a coward?

\_What's even stopping me?\_

Slowly, her eyelids fluttered closed as she willed herself to remember every bit of happiness, fear, pain, and hopelessness she had survived from the moment she joined the Shinsengumi. From being scared, to confused, to accepting, up till the moment she realized she had already fallen till the time she was struggling to get up.

She did it. All of it. She survived all of it.

And she's going to win this too.

Finally feeling some sense of confidence, she opened her eyes, pushed her body from the floor and placed her kodachi back to its stand. A small smile tipped the corners of her lips as she felt courage slowly replace the nervousness that had settled on the pits of her stomach. This is for the better, she thought. She needed to move forward and she's starting it now. Nodding to herself in the mirror across from her, she finally walked towards the door, opened it with vigor, and took her first step outside her room.

Cowardice is not allowed in any way this time.

\* \* \*

><p> 'Morning! Ahâ€"Akane! You're finally here! Are you feeling okay now?' <p>

Akane jumped and nearly dropped the chopsticks in her hand when she heard a cheerful, loud voice behind her. After barely managing to catch the sticks with her fingers, she looked up and gave a shaky smile to Shinpachi who was grinning at her from ear to ear. Beside him was Heisuke who was also beaming and behind the two was Harada who was wearing a slight knowing smile.

She gulped.

'A-Ahâ€| Yes, I'mâ€| I'm fine. I'm so much better now,' she answered weakly and gave an awkward nod to the captains. She almost regretted the second part of her answer, however, when Harada's smile widened into a not so subtle oh-I-know-you-are-so-much-better grin. She would have given him a glare for an answer but instead she was reduced to an embarrassing blushing mess that made Heisuke ask if she still has a fever.

The moment she was finally able to push her body to enter the dining room earlier, her eyes automatically flew to Okita's spot in the room. She felt her breath freeze in her lungs then whistle slowly out of her mouth, however, when she found the seat next to her empty. She was already expecting it since she made it a point to arrive a little earlier than his usual waking schedule. The last thing she wanted is to let him have the first say on this. Especially since she didn't know how he's going to act after what happened yesterday.

Fortunately, the other person who witnessed her embarrassing debacle the other day seemed to have already forgotten the incident. Saitou was calmly eating as usual, not even looking once at her direction even when she announced her presence to the room. Still, that didn't stop her from jumping every time someone entered the hall.

'Feeling a little jerky today, Akane?' Harada asked in a whisper that she only barely caught when he passed her. Her eyes lifted towards him and she mouthed the words 'shut up,' cheeks still flaming.

He only laughed.

'Where's Souji?' Hijikata looked up from his bowl and asked the newly arrived men. Shinpachi only grunted in answer before finally starting to attack his breakfast.

'We called for him when we passed his room but he still seemed to be deep in sleep,' Heisuke answered, picking up his own bowl of food.

The vice-commander's forehead slightly creased as he stared at Heisuke for a moment. Akane could almost hear him speaking out his worry for the other man. As she looked at him, she knew they were thinking the exact same thing that moment.

'It's late. If he still hasn't arrived after breakfast, get Yamazaki to check on him,' he finally said to the younger captain in his usual

gruff voice before he resumed eating again.

'Hai, hai. Haaaa-' Heisuke answered before forcing out a yawn. He was quickly interrupted, however, when his eyes finally fell on Shinpachi's hand slowly inching towards his tray of food. When he realized what was happening, it was already too late.

'O-Oi! Shinpatsu-san! Argh! That's my fish! Get your teeth off it!' 'Ahhh! You ate even the tail, you monster!'

Akane couldn't help but join in on the light-hearted bickering and laughing that ensued in the room. Amidst the usual ruckus, however, she found her eyes sliding towards the empty position beside her very briefly before she focused again on her food. Where is he? Is he sick? Will he come? You know it's already late when the trio comes to breakfast earlier than you. Did something happen?

She picked up her cup and gulped some water to try to push the food and the lump of worry-that had gotten stuck in her throat. How ironic, she thought. With all her apprehension earlier, she expected herself to feel relieved. Yet now she couldn't help but deny the faint trace of sadness she felt because of the vacant seat beside her. She felt on edge. Like she wanted to stand up and start shaking her hands just to get off some of the stress. If not for Sano's eyes watching her from across the room, she would have dropped the food and excused herself already. Instead, she forced herself to continue, raising bite per bite to her lips.

'Maybe if you aren't so slow, Heisuke then you would still have your breakfast. At least try, boy!'

'Do not call me boy, you old man! Why'd you have to eat two servings of breakfast anyway! Do you have three stomachs!?'

'No, but I am much thicker and taller than you so naturally my body needs more fuel and!'

'Shut up or I'll gut you-!'

'Ah, aren't we all so lively this morning?'

In a snap, her eyes locked on the image of her chopsticks held by her frozen hands when a familiar, drawling voice disturbed her mid-thought. She could hear some shuffling behind her and it was not too long when she saw someone drop to the seat to her left in her peripheral vision.

'Ohayo!' Okita muttered as he shifted rather lazily on his seat to find a more comfortable position. At the sound of his voice, her stupid gazing at her utensils broke and her eyes unconsciously drifted towards him. His hair was still a little messy with a few tendrils coming off from his usual tie and the look on his eyes told her he had only been awake for a couple of minutes. She blinked. Despite the slight ruggedness of his appearance, she felt her heart soar a little as she finally saw his face. She just sat there silently, chopstick amazingly still in mid-air as she stared at the man beside her.

'Nice dream?' Harada asked in a light, amused tone from across them. The subtly hidden implication in the captain's voice quickly shook

her from her stupor and caused her to look away, cheeks flaming once more. She must have looked stupid as she stared open-mouthed at him. As a response, she tried to hide her face in her hair and started attacking her food with more vigor.

'Yes. Very nice. I almost didn't want to wake up,' Okita answered happily, the smirk evident on the tone of his voice. For some reason, she felt her blush brighten and she choked a little on her rice. The sound she made caught Souji's attention and she felt him turn his head towards her. She froze. This is it. The first time they were finally going to acknowledge each other after what happened yesterday.

He was silent for a while and she swallowed noisily, waiting in anticipation for what he's going to say.

'Ohayo, kitten. Fattening yourself so early in the morning? You sure you still want to add more to your current weight?' he finally asked in a teasing tone.

She nearly dropped her bowl.

'Wh-What are you implying?! I'm not heavy!' she stuttered as she turned to look at him, her face a darker shade of red now. Okita's smirk only widened and he looked at her with eyes full of mirth.

'Ho? How did you know? You haven't tried carrying yourself, right? The last time I did, I barely made out of the building alive because you were too heavy.'

'I am notâ€"'

'Hey, I'm just saying this as a man who is concerned for you, alright? You should thank me. You wouldn't want other men noticing your weight.'

'What do you meanâ€"'

\_Wait. \_

\_Other menâ€|noticing my weight? \_

Words immediately died in her throat as she caught his last comment. Other men? Whyâ€| is he mentioning other men noticing her? Wasn't it just yesterday that he...

For a moment, she stared at him in confusion as questions flashed in her mind. It didn't make sense. Didn't he just hold her possessively yesterday while they were talking to Harada? Did she just imagine that? How about the pride she heard in his voice when he said that he's her first kiss? Was that just her imagination?

A quick pang of pain shot through her chest that made her look away. What exactly is happening? Whatever it was she was expecting, it was certainly not this. She expected him to tease, even rub her confession to her face. But not this. Not acting as if he didn't care at all.

Gritting her teeth, she broke their eye connection and stared at her

hands on her lap for a moment to calm herself. She knew the other captains were staring at them strangely now but she really didn't care.

She felt numb.

'What is wrong with you?' she finally asked in a low whisper, eyes still fixed on her hands.

'Mm? There is nothing wrong with me. I'm normal. From how you're acting though, it seems like you are the one who is different. Shouldn't you be screaming insults to my face already at this point?' he asked back, waving a hand carelessly at her direction before picking his own bowl of food and starting eating.

The pain shot through her again, though this time it remained longer at the center of her chest. Every word he said felt like a stab to her. It took her even a while to finally realize that her hands have now balled into tight fists on her lap. Yet she can't stop it. She was too confused. And hurt.

And disappointed.

Mainly disappointed.

She didn't know how long she stared at her lap. But finally, she was able to break through her stupor and relaxed her grasp. She didn't know what got to her but somehow, she managed to calmly pick her food again. Thinking over things and hurting can be postponed until she gets to be alone.

'You're right. I was strange. I apologize. I have somehow run out of curse words to hurl at you right now. Tomorrow I will be more prepared,' she managed to say in an even tone though her voice very slightly caught in the end. She covered it up by clearing her throat.

'Ahaha. The two of you always make breakfast very lively just like Heisuke and Nagakura here,' Kondou said in his usual cheerful tone. It was obvious, however, that he had noticed the strange exchange between them with the way he was awkwardly chuckling. Akane briefly bit the wooden chopsticks out of stress when she put them inside her mouth. She must have looked like a fool. Finally, the commander cleared his throat to catch the attention of the room again.

'Everyone, before we finish this meal, there is an announcement I would like to make,' he paused then sighed. There was a dramatic silence that made everyone stop eating immediately. He wore a serious and slightly concerned expression.

'Today, we have to spend some time cleaning the headquarters,' he finally said with a sigh. It took a moment for anyone to react. A few seconds only passed, however, before the room was finally filled with the grunts and groans of the men. Akane couldn't help but look up to study the group. Heisuke, Shinpachi, and Harada looked particularly upset. Even her own captain seemed a little disgruntled.

'I'm sorry, but Kodou-san dropped by late last night because he was in the area. Unfortunately, he also did a thorough look at the place.

Well to put it simply, I got quite the scolding. He said the state of our headquarters is currently not fit to house soldiers at all. So yes, we have to spend the whole morning cleaning, okay? For the meantime Inoue-san's squad will do double rounds this morning instead. We need as much men to help with the cleaning if we want everyone to go back to their normal responsibilities by afternoon. Is that clear?'

'Yes, chief,' Harada groaned.

'I volunteer Heisuke to mop the floors.'

'I volunteer Shinpatsu to take care of the lice problem on the general soldiers' area.'

'Hey, you brat!'

'That makes me remember,' Okita suddenly raised his hand to get the attention of the others. 'There is a leak in the bathroom and we need to have the bath fixed. Oh, and also, Akane and I are together now.'

Akane choked so hard she actually spat food on Hijikata's pant leg.

'Oh go-, I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry vice-commander,' she was onto him in a second, wiping the food away with a napkin. Around her, she could hear almost indistinguishable yelps of surprise, mostly coming from Heisuke and Shinpachi. She could feel her cheeks, forehead, and ears burning but she was so deep in shock her automatic response was to clean her vice-commander instead. Hijikata, on the other hand, seemed to not be paying her attention and was silently staring at Souji.

'W-What? Since when? How did thatâ€"Wait, you like her?!"

'She likes you?!"

'No but. But. But you were always fighting! How did that happen?!"

'She hates you!'

'How did that happen?'

'That's really good news, Souji. I am so happy for you, boy. And Akane too!'

'How did that happen?'

'Heisuke, you're spraying rice all over the place. Swallow your food first, you're disgusâ€"'

'No, waitâ€"but really together as in together or together as in you're going on patrol together? Or training together? Orâ€"'

'HOW DID THAT HAPPEN!'

Despite the racket, Okita remained calm in his seat, his green eyes twinkling. The smile on his lips was different now. It has

temporarily lost its slyness. Instead he looked happy. Genuinely happy.

And maybe a little proud.

After a while he finally raised his hand to quiet down the room again. He leaned his elbows to his knees, green eyes still holding that strange gleam as he grinned at the other captains. Akane stopped her furious brushing of Hijikata's pant leg for a moment and held her breath as the room died down to total silence.

'How did it happen? Well, I stole her first kiss soâ€"'

'SOUJI!'

The moment he said it, the room burst into a flurry of noise again and she finally whipped towards him, eyes round and lips gaping. In the background, Shinpachi sputtered the water he was trying to drink earlier as a way to calm himself all over the floor while Heisuke simply stared blankly, his cheeks red. Beside him, Harada was calmly drinking with an almost smug look in his face. Kondou was laughing and slapping his knee while saying, 'Now that's the captain of the first division' again and again while Gen-san beamed happily at them like a father. Saito looked mildly interested while Sannan simply shook his head exasperatedly despite the faint trace of a smile on his lips.

Akane, on the other hand, felt like she couldn't wish for nothing more than for the ground to swallow her that moment. As she stared at the boy in shock, Okita turned to look at her with glinting eyes and a devilish grin.

'Surprised, kitten?' he asked teasingly in a voice only the two of them could hear. It was alarmingly close to the tone he used while they were in the dark room and it made her remember things all of a sudden.

She flushed. In response, she grabbed for her empty soup bowl and chucked it at him.

'O-Okita-san, you idiot!'

\* \* \*

><p>Akane dropped to the porch step with a sigh, rag still in hand. Beads of sweat dotted her forehead and she pushed back the bangs that stuck to her skin by running her sleeve over it. It has been four hours ever since the headquarters started its cleaning activity and she has been assigned to dust the shoji doors and mop the floor on the eastern part of the house.<p>

Assigned? More like ran away and decided to hide here instead, she thought to herself as she dropped the cloth and clapped her hands together to get rid of the dust.

In truth, it was actually her who decided to do the work instead. After the dining hall burst into riot because of Okita's abrupt announcement, she quickly fled the place and self-assigned herself to take care of that part of the headquarters. She was incredibly shaken

by what happened and she vented it out by harshly wiping the floor and dusting the paper doors without stopping a minute for the next hours.

Fortunately, nobody tried to come near her while she worked. She was actually quite surprised. With the state Shinpachi and Heisuke were babbling earlier, she expected at least one of them to follow her and ask her answer to questions. Still, she couldn't deny that she was relieved. She's guessing Harada asked them to leave her alone for the meantime. And for that she was grateful.

She gave another weary sigh and hugged her knees to her chest. Really, what does Okita think he's doing popping an announcement as abrupt as that? She barely even managed to push herself to go to breakfast earlier and that was last thing she needed. She couldn't even try to review what happened without even physically wincing.

Despite all of it, however, she couldn't help but smile now as she thought about what he did. It may have been brash but at least he didn't continue acting as if nothing really happened between the two of them. When he started teasing her like usual that morning, sadness, helplessness, and resignation nearly ate her up. She thought she will be pushed back to deal with her own feelings again despite everything that happened which for her was a lot worse especially now that she knew they felt the same. In the back of her mind, however, she also knew that no matter how much it hurt her, she wouldn't do anything about it at all should she face the situation. Because now that she knew Hotaru was out of the scene, the only thing she could think that could possibly stop him from acknowledging her is his commitment to Kondou and the cause of the Shinsengumi.

And despite all the selfishness she has slowly developed when it comes to him, that loyalty of his is the sole thing she refuses to touch.

'Have you finally weakened yourself enough to not run away again like earlier?'

Akane jumped on her seat in surprise and quickly turned around at the sound of a voice behind her. There, leaning on the wall with a mildly amused expression was Okita. His cheeks were flushed and his hair was a little messy so she figured he also just finished doing his share of cleaning work.

She opened her mouth to say something but nothing came out so she immediately shut her lips again. A faint tinge of red blossomed on her cheeks because of his question and she turned to look at the yard again as she thought of the best way to answer. It's not like she is actually proud of the sprinting she did earlier.

'Iâ€¢ I didn't run. I was just...surprised,' she briefly winced again as she remembered breakfast. For a while he didn't make any sound. Then, finally, she heard him move and saw him drop to the porch step beside her in her peripheral vision. As she felt his presence, she couldn't help but slightly stiffen her back. Technically speaking, this would be their first time having a normal conversation after that day. She could feel the slightly erratic drumming of her heart in her chest and she stretched her legs in front of her to make herself relax a little.

A whole minute passed without any of them saying anything and they both stared in silence at the shifting sunlight on the yard's brown, cracked soil. It was just an hour before lunch and the sun was sending scorching waves of heat. Staying under the shade of the porch, however, cooled them a little and let them comfortably watch the training ground glitter under the sunlight.

'I did that because I don't want you to feel strange about all this.'

Akane's head snapped up at his sudden announcement and she looked at him in surprise. Okita was still staring ahead, a small smile in his lips. His green eyes were almost reflecting the glow from the ground he was gazing at solemnly.

'I'm sorry, what?'

He sighed in an almost exasperating manner before finally looking at her, smile still in place.

'You do have a talent of getting all embarrassed and acting strange with me every time we!' he trailed off then, as if he wasn't also sure how to describe the situation. Every time they make progress? Was that what he was trying to say?

'every time something happens. So I decided to just blurt it out. Just spill it out fast to the others to get it over with. I honestly think it was effective. Not to mention highly enjoyable.'

She stared at him for a moment, mouth slightly open in surprise. She didn't know what to say about that. Truth be told, it hasn't entered her mind that he did that for that reason. She thought he just wanted to tease. Now that he said it, she couldn't help but feel embarrassed and a little guilty.

'You could have at least told me in advance that you were going to do it. I spat half-chewed food on the vice-commander,' she managed to whisper in a slightly betrayed voice. Her remark, however, was only met by a sudden fit of laughter from him. He was laughing so hard there were actual tears in his eyes. She looked at him incredulously.

'Well, that was a funny sight,' he finally said as he leaned back on his hands after wiping his eyes. 'Serves him right though. Especially after he asked me to do that thing with that woman.'

In a second, Akane's eyes softened and she shifted her gaze from him quickly. By that womanâ€|she figured he must be referring to Hotaru. Suddenly she didn't know what to say again. The subject of Hotaru is something she is not particularly keen on revisiting.

'Soâ€|what happened to her?'

'I was able to follow her the night we thought she was finally able to meet up with the Kageno Senshi Taichi's secret commander. It seemed like she knew I was following her though and she lured me to a fake base instead. I found a dozen rasetsus there. By the time I finished getting rid of them, she was gone.'

Her eyes widened at the mention of furies. 'You were attacked? You weren't hurt, were you?'

Okita gave a short laugh then shook his head. 'No. They were actually quite easy to dispatch. They were so broken already, about half were just attacking each other. I actually think they weren't meant to kill me. Just a distraction.'

She frowned. That was strange. But she cut her train of thought before she even allowed herself to think of the humans turned demons.

'Oh...that's well I'm glad you weren't hurt.'

'Mm-hm,' he grinned, eyes still staring at the yard ahead. Gone was the storm she saw in them weeks before. They looked so green now. Like the meadows she always gazed at from the cherry tree she always climbed back at her home. He looked so peaceful right now-something she doesn't always see-, she had to force to rip her gaze away from him before he even caught her staring.

Akane could feel herself fidgeting now, her fingers intertwining with each other as she struggled. As much as she hated the topic about Hotaru, she had been dying to ask him something. The two of them stayed together as lovers for a long period of time anyway. It may have all been an act but they looked convincing in her eyes during those weeks. There was so much she and the other captains didn't see. Could it be possible that he?

'So about'

'No, Akane. I didn't.'

Her head turned towards him in surprise.

'You didn't what?'

'I didn't feel any attraction towards her. Not even an inkling. And we haven't done anything. That was what you were going to ask right?' he finally turned to look at her for the first time ever since he joined her earlier. His eyes looked clear and honest. As if they were telling her more than what his words were saying. She felt her cheeks go red at how spot on he guessed the question she was about to ask. She dropped her eyes to the floor then looked away from him.

'She was beautiful though.'

She saw him shrug in her peripheral vision before he turned his head ahead again. 'Yes. She was perfect. Beautiful and kind and caring and liked by many. The perfect, deadly combination of a real spy.'

She frowned. She didn't know why she was pushing the subject but somehow she felt like she just needed to let it out before she can take another step forward. She needed this. She needed to take it out of her system.

'If she wasn't evil would you still, you know, not like her?'

Another shrug.

'She isn't you.'

Akane nearly bit her tongue at his answer. His reply was so quick, as if he didn't even think about it and it was just part of his instinct.

The shock, thankfully, made her think up of a fast response, no matter how senseless it was. She stared at her hands, not having the strength to look him in the face yet.

'You said she was perfect. So you're implying that I'm not.'

This time, it was his time to look at her. She felt her face start to redden more under his gaze.

'You're not. You are brash, clumsy, hot-headed, doesn't know a thing about following the rules of her seniors, and tend to not think things over before doing it. You're easily embarrassed and there are times when you feel scared,' he said in a flourish, even ticking the reasons he recited in his fingers. She scowled at him.

'Hey now, listen here!'

'but they're also what makes you good. You're not perfect. You are real.'

Her words stuck in her throat before she could even fully argue and her eyes went wide with surprise. She blinked at him once. Then twice before finally managing to rip her eyes away from him to hide the redness of her face. She didn't know how to answer that.

'I see!' she mumbled as she started fiddling with the edges of her kimono. She heard him chuckle beside her lightly before falling silent. He seemed to be thinking of something too.

'And you and Sano? You don't like him?'

Akane was ultimately taken aback by his question and the way his voice sounded. For a moment he didn't sound like Okita at all. He sounded subdued, and, for a very very brief second, not sure of himself. It nearly made her look at him in worry.

'I like him. As a friend. But not that way!' she answered him quietly.

Silence.

'He's really good with women. He's a famous guy in Shimabara. And gentle and caring too. I've heard a lot say that he is a good husband material, whatever in hell that means.'

She bit her lips to stifle herself from letting out a giggle. If it weren't for the seriousness of the situation, she would have laughed loudly already. Here they are, asking from assurances from each other. Even trying to build up the sources of their envy. It was quite funny. A soft chuckle managed to escape her lips.

'Yes, I know that. But he isn't sadistic, irritating, and he does know when to stop teasing.'

Okita looked at her. Even without seeing him she knew he was grinning at her.

'You make it sound as if those are good qualities.'

She nodded her head. Finally she urged herself to look at him. Slowly, their eyes met. The green and brown that were both so troubled weeks ago now stared at each other calmly with confidence.

'It has only been you. Ever since from the beginning. It never changed.'

The moment the words fell from her lips, a fire seemed to have started in his emerald green orbs and his lips quirked until it formed into a boyish grin. Akane couldn't help herself but return his smile. They just stared at each other for a moment, grinning at each other like fools. And for a while, that was already enough.

'Soâ€|what are you planning to do now?' he finally asked after a while.

Her smile wavered a little and she felt hesitance bubble up inside her.

'I don't know...What do you want to do?'

Okita noticed and he frowned at her slightly. It was obvious he wasn't able to follow her train of thought this time.

'What do you mean?'

It took her a while to answer. She didn't know how to put it in words and she looked around the yard as if looking to find the answer there. Her eyes focused on a tree branch waving in the wind and she braced herself to say it.

'I know you have already dedicated yourself to the Shinsengumiâ€|and Kondouâ€|I don't want to mess with that,' she finally said as she followed the branch's movement with her eyes. As hard as she tried, she couldn't push herself to look at him. Not while he seemed to have run out of words too. Every second of silence from him added to the queasy feeling on the pit of her stomach. Another minute passed before she finally heard him sigh. She almost felt her heart drop at the sound of it. She knew itâ€|he was going to change his mind with the subject of Kondou.

'Well I guess that just means I have to work it out a bit to give a position for you, huh?'

Her head snapped up to look at him.

'What?' she asked in an almost incredulous voice. He only grinned back at her.

'I just have to move my priorities a little to give you a spot up there.'

She still continued gaping at him. When she did not say anything, his smile melted away and he looked at her seriously.

'If I say I choose Kondou and our cause. What will you do? Will you stop me?'

'No.'

A smile lit Okita's face again at her answer. He looked proud. Like he was finally able to confirm something he knew all along.

'Exactly. You understand my cause. I can go out there and fight without worrying you'll die pining and worrying about me. Don't get me wrong, I am still loyal to him. I am still his sword. And I will still lay my life for him in a snap if I can be sure that he gets to where he deserves to be if I do it. Nothing really changed, Akane. You just came along and was added to the list. I can stand in the battlefield, fighting for Kondou, and I know you'll willingly stand there beside me.'

At his words, something clicked within her and suddenly everything made sense. She did not need to ask anything else because she knew he was right. He was right with everything because he also understood. Slowly, she smiled. That was all it took for them to finally settle it.

'Yes. You're probably right,' she answered, now looking at the yard again. Deep inside, she was brimming with happiness. All the doubts she felt earlier dissipated in a snap. All because of his words.

The two of them fell silent for a while, just reveling in everything that has happened. She let her mind wander too much in the peace she was floating in that she failed to immediately notice the shuffling sound beside her. Akane suddenly started on her seat when she felt a weight plop down her lap. Looking down, her eyes widened when they met a grinning Okita laying his head there.

'O-Okita-san, what are youâ€"'

'Souji. Not Okita. Souji.'

She swallowed.

'So-Soujiâ€" she flushed red as she let the name awkwardly roll in her tongue.

'Hm?' he flashed her his usual sly grin and she nearly hit his head because of it. It was clear he was enjoying it.

'You really have to get off. It isn't appropriateâ€"'

'Ah, but I got tired from all the cleaning I did. I need to rest.'

'Butâ€"'

'It's fine right? It's fine now.'

She stopped what she was about to say at the look he gave her. There

was honesty there and happiness. That moment, he did not look like the man she fought so she can join the Shinsegumi. Or the one that kissed her in the dark.

Instead, he looked like a child who was finally happy after finding his way home.

Slowly, she lifted her hand and rested it on top of his head. She pushed back some of the bangs that have fallen over his eyes and she smiled back at him.

'Yes, it's alright now, I guess.'

His smile widened and he closed his eyes. A look of peace settled on his features and she just looked at him as she continued playing lightly with his hair.

'Akane?'

'Hm?'

A light gust of wind passed them, lightly ruffling their hair and clothing. The harsh rays of the sun temporarily dimmed and the yard ahead of them became bathed with its soft glow.

'Tadaima.'

She smiled at him despite his eyes still being closed.

'Okairi, Souji.'

### 30. Side Story: The Lily

A/N: This is another story that I've been plotting for a while. I am planning to do it after I have finished Unbound by Time though I am not sure if I am going to pursue it because I'm not that sure about my ideas yet. So please indulge me with this side story. It's just that, the scene has just been tumbling on the edges of my mind and it won't stop bugging me unless I finally write it.

\* \* \*

><p>'Thank you for the breakfast.'</p>

She looked up from her plate, light green eyes falling on his half-finished food. The bread had three or so bites and the egg was entirely untouched. Her fingers tightened a little on her chopsticks. Did she make it too salty? She was sure she measured it properly this time. Or maybe it was too bland?

She wanted to ask but instead, she moved her gaze back to her own bowl. It took her an hour to prepare the meal, hoping to make breakfast a little more special today. However, it seemed like it was still no different from the other ones they had. Fortunately, she didn't have any time to wallow too much when her attention was grabbed by the soft sound of chair being pulled back.

When her eyes grazed him again, he was already pulling on his dark suit. He threw a quick glance to his watch and she also slowly stood

up from her seat, fully knowing his next actions. She walked over to the wooden drawer behind her, took his bag, walked over to his side, and gave it to him. He took it from her and slung it over his shoulder, making sure that the strap won't make crinkles on the fabric of his suit.

'I'll be going now. I'll be back at eight o'clock,' he gave her a slight bow and started walking towards the door. She followed him and the two of them stopped at the threshold.

'Do you want me to cook dinner?' she asked as she watched him fish for the car keys on his pocket.

He serenely shook his head.

'I have a meeting with the other captains. I'll probably eat at the office.'

Her eyes flicked downwards.

\_Of course. —

'Ahâ€|I seeâ€|Well, take care.'

He nodded in acknowledgment before saying a brief 'You too.' When he turned to finally go down the steps, however, she caught sight of his neck tie and noticed how it was a little loose on the collar and needed some adjustment. He had already taken a step on their front porch when she found herself calling after him.

'Ah, wait!'

He turned to look at her, his calm face showing mild curiosity. She suddenly froze in her position. She was like a deer caught in headlights, not having any idea of what to do or say. Her instinct caused her to automatically lift her hand to fix the tie herself but she stopped when her fingers were just mere inches from his collar.

\_Move. Just a little bit more and you'll finally be able to touch him. Just do it. Just close the distance. —

She didn't know how long she stayed like that. But just like always, her hand merely stayed in mid-air as she was unable to break down the walls that separated him and her. They were invisible yet strong. He was a mere feet away from him right now but still she felt like she was staring at him from a different dimension altogether.

'Yukina?'

The sound of his calm voice stirred her from her reverie and she started a little. She finally took notice of her still suspended hand and blinked. Ever so slowly, she raised her forefinger so that she can point to his tie.

'Your tieâ€|It needs adjusting.'

She dropped her hand. He looked at the place she pointed and understood.

'Ah, yes, thank you,' he said as he adjusted it himself. She merely smiled. Deep inside she was asking herself why she wasn't even able to do something as simple as that.

\_Another day of not being able to close the distance again. \_

'I really must be going. You don't need to wait for me later,' he politely said before bowing once more. He merely waited for her to bow back before he's already on his way to the garage where his car was waiting.

He never looked back once.

She closed the door before he was even able to get the car out of parking. It was useless anyway. The moment he passes the front steps, she knew his mind is already on his work. As for him, he knew she wasn't really seeing him even as she stared at him while he drove away. Her mind was already elsewhere too. Probably thinking of the next subject she should paint.

Today, however, was different. She didn't go straight to her studio or finished her breakfast. Yukina's mind is just right where it should be.

She now sat on the couch, eyes staring ahead at an oil landscape of a winter scene. Everything was white and the moon was big and peeking from behind thin wisps of clouds. There was a sole flower lying on the snow covered ground, its radiant petals facing the glowing orb above: A lily.

As she stared at the fallen beauty, she had the impulse to silently recite the mantra that she seemed to be repeating more often in her head lately. It was senseless, but it kept her grounded and painfully aware of the current situation they were in.

\_I'm Yukina Saito.\_

\_20 years old.\_

\_Married to Hajime Saito for 1 month and four days.\_

\_Everything has been going smoothly. The house, the car, our jobs. Our parents are getting along well. Our friends are happy.\_

\_There is just one problem.\_

\_We aren't in love. \_

### 31. Chapter 29: Secrets

A/N: How long has it been already? First of all, I apologize for only releasing this now. The good half of this chapter had been sitting on my folder for two months. I had a very bad case of writer's block and had to work hard to get myself out of it. Second, please excuse me if some may find this chapter not exciting enough. I had bad luck and lost all my files in my computer. I was able to retrieve my drafts but my plot summaries- MY PLOT SUMMARIES I WASN'T ABLE TO SAVE. So right now I am literally struggling to write because I've made big

changes the last time I edited it and already forgot those details now. In other words, I had to start thinking about them all over again. I want to cry.

Anyway, thank you to all of those who left reviews during the break. To Aogetsu-who left reviews every chapter, wow, i like you-, phantome, Jinxes, and It's a Christine (these are just names i can remember right now) thank you for all your nice words. And of course to everyone who is still reading it even though I'm a horrible person and updates once in a blue moon. Cheers!

\* \* \*

><p>It started as a slight constricting feeling in the middle of her chest. Then the pressure climbed to the back of her throat before it finally settled persistently at the sides of her jaw. She clenched her teeth to try to ward it off despite the watering of her eyes. She barely lasted 10 seconds, however, before she finally gave in to the reflex.</p>

'Sleepy again?'

Akane looked up to see a mildly amused Okita smiling down at her as she finished yawning. She winced a little before giving a slight nod.

'I haven't been sleeping very well lately,' she answered as she wiped her watery eyes with the back of her hand.

It was an hour or two after sunset and they are currently traversing the busy night streets of the town, light blue haoris tucked neatly on their sides. They have just finished patrolling certain routes in the city and are on their way to Sakura's shop to pick some sake for Shinpachi. A change in schedule resulted in the first and third division to pair up in the rounds and so here they are now, idly walking around after a tiring day of work.

'I told you, you didn't need to think of me every night. You know you can always come to me when you miss me, right?'

Akane, who just felt the beginnings of another yawn suddenly snapped her lips shut at what he said, whipped her head and openly stared at the man currently smirking confidently beside her.

'I wasn't thinking of you.'

'Ho? Your eyes say otherwise though,' Okita shot back, smirk widening in that very same way it always does whenever she reacts to him just the way he wanted to. Her cheeks burned a little as an automatic response but she kept her gaze steady on him.

'The only emotion that my eyes are telling you right now is annoyance,' she replied as she deepened her scowl. He retaliated by slightly raising a brow at her, his green eyes dancing with a mischievous, knowing light.

'And attraction. Don't forget the attraction.'

Akane rolled her eyes at him before turning her face ahead the road again. Despite the set of her lips, she didn't dare correct him at

all. A month or two ago, she would have done just that without batting an eyelash. Deny him flat out without mercy-maybe even throw something at him while she's at it. The past few weeks, however, have been entirely different.

After that day on the porch when the two of them talked and settled things, she expected that her life with the Shinsengumi will make a complete 360 degree turn.

She couldn't be any more wrong.

Sure the first few days have been slightly uncomfortable with Shinpachi and Heisuke throwing her knowing, impish smiles every second but that was entirely understandable and expected. It didn't affect her that much, knowing that the pair didn't mean any harm and were just acting like kids as usual. Truth be told, it was even easier for her to deal with the duo than the moments she had to speak with Kondou.

The man never says anything directly to her but the way he smiles and looks at her like a proud, contented father makes her just too conscious of herself sometimes. There was even a moment when she tripped on the very broom she was using after accidentally overhearing him talking to Gen-san about certain marriage plans. It made her so out of sorts that she had to punch Souji by the armâ€" who at that moment happened to be free and was wasting his time by pestering herâ€" just to make him stop laughing his head off and make things worse for her.

As for the two of themâ€|

It was really hard for her to describe their current relationship. It was a gray area in a lot of ways but at the same time she also felt like she knew everything that was happening at the same time. She didn't know how he was able to do it but somehow, Okita was able to maneuver himself in her life without blatantly changing the way they treated each other before.

He still doesn't miss a chance to tease her in front of the others and she still doesn't pass up the opportunity to fight with him. The way he talks to her didn't change at all and they don't touch each other in that familiar way two newly people involved do. If anything, he had become even more brutal with his remarks to her now that he has more teasing material to work with.

Yet despite everything still remaining the same, there is still that punctuated difference that she can easily feel between them.

The two of them still spend the same amount of time as they do before but somehow, she could still feel the connection. She can see him for only a few hours every day after and she'd still be happy about it. He can smirk at her from the distance while he's training and she's on kitchen duty but still she knew that it was already enough for him.

Akane didn't know if it was the more meaningful silences they share together after all the teasing has subsided or the way they silently watch each other from afar that causes it. She couldn't say if it was the way he steadily looks at her or the way she can easily smile at him now without having to worry about what he will think of her. No,

nothing changed between them at all but at the same time everything was different.

They never went through the transition that new couples have. There is no awkwardness or even the sudden desire to always be together. Instead, they very much returned back to their old habits after settling their feelings. It's as if they just waited for the two of them to finally meet in the middle and when that finally happened, they just fell into this new pace as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

If Akane would be asked to give one definite answer to describe what changed, she would say it is that new confidence and security that they found. It was that feeling that even though they aren't always together, they knew that everything is alright. Because the two of them are moving in the same world. Solid and very much together.

'Are you still thinking of how you can deny your attraction to me?'

Akane looked up from her zoning in and saw him slightly smiling ahead. She laughed softly before also looking at the same direction, her brown eyes roaming the street now softly bathed with light.

'No. Not at all.'

She felt his eyes slip down towards her.

'Thinking of how Shinpachi and the others seemed to have planned this so that we could be alone together and they can tease us afterwards?'

She laughed louder this time.

'Wrong too. Though I am also quite sure they did plan it. I think they are frustrated that they couldn't tease us enough since we, as Heisuke puts it, "spend time with each other as frequently as Shinpachi spends proper time with a woman".'

'And are you okay with that?'

'Hmm? Okay with what?'

Okita looked at her with a slight smile on his face. His eyes, however, were searching.

'Are you okay that we don't spend as much time with each other?'

Akane stared at him a little longer as she tried to fathom the emotions in his green orbs. Finally, she smiled back at him.

'Yes. I'm very much alright with it.' I don't really need anything more. \_

As if she spoke those words out loud, Okita's smile widened until it formed into his confident smirk.

'Good. Because you'll have to work harder if you really want me to

give you more,' he joked, moving his head to stare ahead again.

She made a face at him, barely stopping from grinning herself.

'You are a horrible man.'

He laughed.

'I know.'

The two of them fell into a comfortable silence again as they continued to wander the now crowded streets. Until now, even after spending almost a year with the Shinsengumi, she still couldn't get over the beauty of ancient Japan. Akane hadn't really considered herself before as the type of girl who has a bias on traditional things despite of her family's practices. Looking around her now, however, she could understand why many find this era beautiful. There is just a certain charm to the way people moved and acted. They may not be rich and were stuck in the middle of a war but still, they are struggling to live and try to find the good in everything.

'So, why couldn't you sleep?'

Akane's slight smile momentarily froze in her lips as she heard his question. She didn't really know how to answer and it took her a couple of seconds to think of a good response. Thankfully, she was able to utter something back before her discomfort became too obvious.

'It wasâ€¦I'm just feeling so restless lately. Probably because it has gotten a little cold in my room. I just couldn't relax.'

She felt his eyes on her for a moment and tried her best not to stiffen under his gaze. Souji is an observant person, probably the most observant one among all the captains. Cold sweat started to dot her forehead as he continued to study her silently. He finally looked away after a moment, causing a surge of relief to wash over her.

'Is that so? It's probably because your room is closest to the patio. The wind can be pretty strong there at night.'

'Mm-hm,' Akane simply mumbled and stared at her feet as they continued walking. His voice sounded neutral but she knew, from the very slight undertone of it that he knew something was wrong. The very fact that he gave reason to her own lie and didn't pry about it, however, was what made her feel even more guilty.

It's not like she had much choice though.

Because the real reason behind her restlessness is something he would never understand, even if she tried to explain it.

Ever since she was young, Akane knew she was different. She wasn't alone in her head. She could hear voices, bodiless ones that all seem to be looking out into the outside world from her own eyes. When she was five, she found out that she can quiet them down by making contact with the book telling the story of the Shinsengumi. That was part of the reason why she grew so attached to it. It was her salvation. The balm that soothed her worries every time her strangeness nagged her.

Those voices stopped ever since she went back in time. The only one time she heard someone inside her head again was when Hanae was trying to communicate with her. Besides from that, everything was fine. In this world, she is nothing special. She was just as human as the other people surrounding her in this new reality she lives in.

That was until a few weeks ago.

It happened a week and a half after that day by the porch with Okita. She was on the verge of falling asleep when a sudden cacophony of voices started echoing in her head. They came so fast and loud she had to physically pull herself off her bed and clutch her head between her trembling hands. The whole ordeal took less than half a minute but by the time they subsided, she was barely stopping herself from vomiting because of the shock. Ever since then, the voices became a regular part of her consciousness again, the echoes coming just before she was about to go to sleep.

But their return wasn't what worries her the most. Instead, what makes her so concerned is how the tone of the voices changed in her head. When she was still living her normal life, they were nothing more than just whispers. They were there with her but most of the time they talked to her in soothing tones, whispering encouragements or just random, senseless things. This time, however, was different. They were scared. As if they were trying to tell her something important and urgent. Oftentimes they were so strong and troubling to the point that she dreads going to sleep, causing her to get lack of proper rest.

'Akane?'

'Akane!'

Akane broke from her stupor and looked around, her heart suddenly beating erratically. For a while she earnestly thought that the voices have started invading even her conscious thoughts. Her worry dissipated; however, when she suddenly felt something tackle her out of nowhere. The thick brunette locks currently blocking her vision was all it took for her to catch up on what is happening.

'S-Sakura-chan. Hello,' she choked as the girl holding her adjusted the grip around her chest a little too tight.

'Akane! Akane! Oh, I missed you so much! It's nice to finally see you again! I honestly thought you forgot about me because of a CERTAIN man but here you are visiting me! I am so happy!' the girl jumped up and down, causing her to cough as the force circling her torso intensified. She was just about to ask help from Okita when her friend finally decided to let go of her.

She grinned at her impishly out of guilt. Sakura was one of her rocks during the time she was still struggling over the issue of Okita and Hotaru. Despite all the help she gave her, however, she wasn't able to visit her over the last few weeks because of training and patrol. The girl also stopped visiting the headquarters around the same time too since it was currently high season for their restaurant. Still, she couldn't help but feel guilty for not going out of her way and

visiting the girl.

'I'm so sorry. Saito-san added more hours of training and we all had to patrol for extra hours recently. I only literally had free time today,' she said in an apologetic tone. Sakura, however, only waved her away and beamed at her even more brightly.

'Oh, it's okay don't worry about it. We've been pretty busy back in the shop anyway so it's not like I was wasting time too. However,' the girl's eyes suddenly narrowed and floated towards Okita who was silently standing beside her. Sakura stepped closer to him, hands on her waist, and glared openly at the captain.

'You.'

Souji's eyebrows shot up. He was clearly amused.

'Hai, Sakura-chan?'

'Akane's mine.'

'Ho?'

'Yeah. I found her and took care of her during those times she was crying over you,' the petite girl was growling now as she stood on tiptoe to somehow lessen the rather big height gap between her and the man.

Akane nearly bit her tongue at what she said.

'Sakura-chan, please-'

'I know she was crying over me. Unfortunately, she is mine now too. I kissed her.'

Both girls gasped in horror and simultaneously screamed 'Okita-san!' and 'You mongrel!' in strangled voices.

'It's true. And she said she lovedâ€"'

'Oi! Souji! Akane! You're finally here!'

Akane was just a hairsbreadth away from choking the man with her haori when a voice she knew so well greeted them from the entrance of the shop. Looking over, she was met by the warm smile of Heisuke who was currently cradling a jug of sake in his arms.

'Heisuke-kun, you're here,' she smiled back warmly at the boy when he approached them. Her eyes drifted then to the jug he was holding.  
'You're here to buy sake? But didn't Nagakura-san ask us to buy for you three already?'

At her question, Heisuke's eyes also fell to container he was holding before scratching his head. 'Ah yes, but you see, Shinpatsu-san doubted that Souji will really pick it up for him so I went ahead and got it instead.'

'Heh? Is that so?' Okita asked in a sly tone, lips upturned in a knowing grin. 'Are you sure you're just not here to visit Sakura? You even had to use me as an excuse, Heisuke-kun?'

At his remark, both Heisuke and Sakura turned to him, faces burning and flushed. The pair tried to stutter a few phrases—“none of which made sense”—which caused Akane to giggle softly herself.

‘No, why would I do that I really needed to get the sake’

‘Yes, he needed to get the sake. He wouldn’t waste his free time coming here at all just to talk about things no’

‘Yes, actually I needed to get three more bottles—“don’t look at me like that!”

‘Hmm? So you came here to talk about things, neh, Heisuke-kun? Maybe you’re reporting me and Akane to your lover here?’

There was a split second of silence as Heisuke and Sakura blinked at Okita, wearing identical comical expressions. Then, like a twin volcano, they burst at exactly the same time.

‘L-L-Lover-’

‘Wha—wha—no—“how can you—’

Akane was genuinely shaking in laughter now at the continuous embarrassment of the two. At this point, she knew she had to physically excuse herself if she wanted to spare herself from totally cracking. Fortunately, Souji seemed to be enjoying torturing the pair himself that he just easily nodded and waved her off when she volunteered to pick up the other sake jugs Heisuke mentioned earlier. The last thing she heard before the duo’s blabbering was finally drowned by the new wave of noises inside the shop was Sakura screaming about Okita trying to change the subject and threatening to decapitate him if she made her cry again.

Inside, she was warmly met by Sakura’s mother who handed her the number of jugs she requested. Having known her from the times she went to stay with her daughter, it was easy for her to waste a few minutes chatting with the woman as she waited for the trio’s argument outside to subside. She only finally decided to excuse herself when her husband came calling for her from the kitchen. Knowing she had already overstayed her welcome, Akane gave a slight bow to her and promised to get Sakura for her.

Her face was met once more by the chilly air of Kyoto when she exited the restaurant. Squinting a little at the sudden change of lighting outside, she spent a few seconds trying to adjust her sight and looking towards the direction of the trio. She was so preoccupied that when she took a step away from the door, she didn’t notice the man who was walking past her. She only realized what was happening when her body collided with the stranger’s, causing the jugs she was balancing on her arms to topple dangerously.

‘Oh, oh—’ Akane mumbled softly as she slightly swayed to keep the bottles from crashing to the ground. A hand suddenly shot out from nowhere and helped balance the one on the top of her hand. Breathing a sigh of relief, she reached out to arrange the bottles in her arms as she spoke to her savior.

'Ah, thank you so much. I'm sorry, sir. I wasn't looking. Are you hurt? Iâ€"'

'You should look where you're going. You never know when you'll fall and never be able to get up again.'

Akane's eyes which were still currently locked at the bottles she was arranging widened at the sound of the voice. Goosebumps slowly crept up her arms and the back of her neck in a way that wasn't completely caused by the cold night air. There was a new chill that had blossomed inside her. Something that she had definitely felt before.

It may have only lasted seconds but during that short moment, she felt like an insect trapped in a spider's web. She couldn't move. Couldn't breathe. Everything was trapped inside her. Struggling and failing to break free. Then came a voice inside her head that finally broke her frozen state. It was fleeting yet powerful enough to make her finally move her head and stare at the direction of the man who is just about to disappear in the shadowed parts of the street.

He was wearing a simple brown kimono and he was walking in that leisurely pace of someone who is not afraid of the monsters lurking at night. In fact, he seemed to be reveling in the darkness. With all his deadly grace, Akane's initial impulse was to take a glimpse of his profile. Unfortunately, a great part of the stranger's head was conveniently covered by a wide-brimmed wooden hat that washed a huge part of his face in shadows.

Despite that, Akane knew she didn't need another confirmation. She already had a pretty good guess of who he might be. It is impossible but her gut feeling gave her the validation she needed.

The phrase uttered inside her head earlier was what convinced her. It was only one word, one command, but it was one of the scariest things she had ever heard in her life.

\_Run.\_

\* \* \*

><p>Souji was still grinning triumphantly at the still blushing pair in front of him when Akane came back with the sake. One glance at her, however, and he knew that something was wrong. Her face looked ashen and her lips were pale. Cold washed over him as something hit him. He knew that look. He had seen her wear it once before.</p>

Okita's response to it was automatic. Fingers slightly grazing the katana on his side, his eyes sharply scanned the surroundings despite knowing with a dreadful, heavy feeling that whatever he was looking for was already gone by now. His smile was still unwavering and his stance was still casual but deep inside he was cursing.

\_Dammit. I look away for a minute. \_

'Alright. Teasing you has already become boring. We need to get going now. Heisuke, you going with us?' he asked casually, his mind singularly focused now in one thing: Going home.

Okita Souji is a man who knew his talents and skills. Besides from being a gifted swordsman, he is one with a sharp sense of what's going on around him. And right now there is only one thing he was sure of. That somewhere out there, danger reared its ugly head again.

\* \* \*

><p>Midnight. Akane gazed over the patio from just within her bedroom door. Usually she would have blamed her inability to sleep on the voices within her head. This night, however, was different. For the first time in weeks it was her choice to stay awake. Because right now her only way to give herself a sense of safety was to make sure she can see everything with her own eyes.</p>

Her nerves were on fire and all of her senses seemed sharpened tenfold as she stared out in the moonlit washed yard in front of her. She could hear everything. From the drone of the cicadas to the soft creaking of the frogs on the small pond beyond. She was alert. Ready. Sure enough, she was able to easily pick up the soft creak of the wooden floor next to her slightly open door. The noise set her off so fast that she barely had time realizing her own actions. In seconds, she had whipped out the kodachi resting beside her, tore open the door, and leveled the glistening blade to the throat of the visitor.

She was met by a firm hand on her wrist and green eyes.

'S-Soujiâ€|' she mumbled, her eyes wild and her breathing ragged. She felt the hand around her wrist tighten for a moment before slowly pushing it away from his throat. Akane let her hand fall limply beside her.

'Feeling jittery tonight?'

She looked up at the tone of his voice before turning away and returning to her seat by the door. He didn't sound teasing or suspicious at all which confirmed one thing. He knew something was up.

'What are you doing here?' she asked instead as she wrapped her arms around her knees. He remained standing outside her door for a few seconds before finally allowing himself inside her own room and sitting beside her.

'Checking up on you.'

Akane looked up in surprise at his straight up answer. He was now looking over the patio with a look she couldn't quite place. She opened her mouth to speak but nothing came out.

'You couldn't sleep again?'

She didn't say anything. She felt something strange well up inside her at the silence that followed his question. What is going on? Why isn't he asking the questions they so blatantly needed to talk about? What was with the kodachi? Why was she shaking when they went home earlier? She knew he noticed it. What is going on with her?

'Akane.'

'H-Hai?'

'I have just one question. Are you okay?'

She stared at him with eyes clearly asking for help. She felt like crying, spilling to him the truth. Yet at the same time she doesn't have any idea where and how to start.

'Soujiâ€|why are you not asking me things?'

A flicker of something crossed his eyes. He turned his head to stare at the patio again, causing moonlight wash over a part of his cheek and shadows dance over his features.

'I don't believe in prying. I think once you're ready, you will talk to me on your own.'

Akane felt something clutter her throat. Fear and guilt washed over her like a tidal wave, suffocating her in their deadly grips.

'I'm sorry.' That was all she managed to choke out.

Okita smiled and cocked an eyebrow at her.

'For the secrets?'

She nodded her head. The two of them fell silent. She trying to sort out the things she wanted to say and him waiting there like what he had always done.

It took a moment before she finally brought herself to speak again. When she did, she felt him stiffen beside her.

'I think Ayato's alive.'

It took him a while to answer. When he spoke, his voice was cold and sounded alien to her. 'I killed him. I saw him die with my own eyes.'

The choking feeling in her throat intensified. Akane felt the familiar helpless feeling of not knowing how to reason out with things. It was something that she had met countless times before but never get used to.

'I know. It's just that earlier, the man who bumped me on the street, I had a strong feeling that it was him. It's impossible. It's crazy, I know butâ€"'

'Then I have to talk to Hijikata-san about it in the morning.'

She stopped mid-sentence and stared at him.

'What?'

'If Ayato is alive we need to get ready.'

'Butâ€|you saidâ€|you're taking my word for itâ€|even though you saw him die?'

Souji looked at her properly this time. There was a slight crease on his forehead—the only indicator that he was worried—but his features were clear from any doubt.

'You may have secrets but I don't think you have a reason to lie. What you refuse to do is tell others things. I think that's different.'

That shut her up. She never really looked at it that way. Akane had somehow convinced herself that she had been lying ever since she came here. After all, there were things she kept within herself for selfish reasons. Where she came from, her initial reason for joining the group, and about the issue of her blood. She had felt the need to spill them out countless times before, yes, but every time she had collected enough courage to do so, she finds herself stopping because of her senseless fear. Telling them about her blood will require her to talk about Hanae, then her origin, and where she came from. And somehow, deep inside, she knows that'll change the way they look at her. She wanted them to just know her the way they already do right now. She didn't want to be different. She didn't want to be that girl who wasn't even supposed to exist in this timeframe.

Looking at Souji now, however, she could slowly feel her world slowly turning full circle. He had given her a chance and now trusts her despite all the secrets she is constantly trying to keep. At that moment she didn't care if she was a strange time-travelling girl. Because she knew whatever she says to him right now, he'll just smirk at her and treat her like he always did.

'I'm sorry. For making you worry,' she whispered as she stared at him. Her room was dark but she knew the tone of her voice was already enough to betray her tears. 'Everything is so complicated. I don't want even know where to start. I'm scared and I don't want to sound crazy.'

Okita slightly nodded. 'I can't say I understand. I personally dislike secrets. They are good in screwing things up. But there are a few things I do myself that I'm sure people don't understand either. Stealing Hijikata's haiku book is a good example.'

Akane couldn't help but suddenly snort in laughter despite her tears at the example. Indeed, there were a few times she had seen the vice-commander red in the face and panting as he tried to chase Okita with his haiku book. It was secretly a special event everyone in the headquarters look forward in watching.

'I don't understand it but I can't exactly say I hate it,' she said as she wiped her eyes with her sleeves. She felt a little bit better now.

'He is bad at it.'

'Very?'

'More than you could ever imagine.'

The two of them broke into laughter again. Once the last of the giggles subsided, she turned to him and looked straight into his eyes.

'I'll try to work around it. The secrets. I want to tell you everything.'

Souji's smirk softened into a smile.

'You know where to find me.'

Akane returned the smile. For that brief moment, she reveled in that silent connection they always share. It always calmed her down and acted as her refuge. After a while, she finally had the courage to force herself to look away from his eyes and stand up from her seat on the floor.

'I'm sorry again for troubling you. It's late. You have to go to bed. You have patrol tomorrow morning,' she said, wrapping her robe around her tighter as she moved closer to the door. She didn't want to be rude but having him get enough rest is what's more important to her right now.

Okita, however, didn't move from his position. He simply smirked up at her, his eyes dancing with a strange light.

She frowned. 'What?'

'You know, if you're scared, I can sleep with you tonight.'

She gasped as quickly as she tore open the door.

'No.'

'But you don't feel safe.'

'Somehow, I have a feeling I that I will also face the same danger if I let you stay here.'

Souji spent a good half minute laughing before finally standing up.

'You think I will touch youâ€|if given the chance?' he asked in a much lower tone as he took a step towards her. Akane felt her lips hang open for a second at what he was doing. When she didn't answer, he took another step again. And another until they were so close she could hear him breathing.

'No. I don't think you will,' she finally managed to choke out as she kept the eye connection. It was true. She doesn't feel threatened at all. Just a littleâ€|flustered at his closeness.

Okita was silent for a while. Finally, his eyes lost their teasing look and he grinned at her.

'Good. Because I really won't. There's another time for that.'

Akane thanked the darkness for concealing her burning cheeks. As if knowing her current emotional state, however, Okita's grin widened for a moment. Then, the grin receded into a small smile.

'Are you sure you're going to be okay though?' he asked again, this time in a much serious voice. Akane knew his offer to stay with her

for the night was earnest. She was thankful for it but she didn't want to bother him more. Plus, she needed time to herself to sort out things-things she's finally going to say to him.

'I'll be alright. I was just on edge earlier. It was silly of me to think someone can infiltrate the headquarters in the first place. I'm feeling a lot better now. Thank you.'

Souji silently watched her for a while as if he's trying to read her mind. Then he stepped back and gave her a nod.

'Alright. Try to get some sleep. You'll be on cooking duty tomorrow and I don't want a bad breakfast,' he grinned as he stepped out the door. Akane rolled her eyes but followed him up to the threshold.

'I never serve bad food. You know that.'

He grinned wider at her. 'Goodnight, kitten.'

She smiled.

'Goodnight, Souji.'

He had already taken a few steps when he suddenly turned and went to her door again. Akane stopped from shutting them and looked at him questioningly.

'I don't get a goodnight kiss?' he smirked at her.

Akane shut the door a little too fast. His triumphant laughter floated into her room until he finally disappeared into the corridor.

\* \* \*

><p>Akane was having a good dream. Her mother was there, caressing her face in that loving way she always did whenever she felt bad as a child. Her hand was soft and her strokes slowly melted away all the worries and pain she had. She smiled. She didn't want this to end.</p>

\_Akaneâ€|\_

The strokes continued. Slowly, however, she could feel her mother's movements changing. Her hands are coarser than usual and she was touching her faster, rougher now. She felt her cheeks slowly getting raw because of the force.

\_Akaneâ€|\_

All of a sudden, she felt a sudden pain slash across her flesh. A sharp fingernail. Akane's eyes flew open as she was completely ripped from her dream.

The sight that met her was something that looked straight out from a nightmare. Red hair, like dried blood and eyes so black it seemed like you were looking into two holes leading straight to hell.

'Ho-Hotaruâ€"

The girl gave her a smile that sent her reeling in terror before pushing a rag to her mouth and yanking her hair.

'Hello, Akane-chan. I came to pick you up. It's time to go back.'

### 32. Chapter 30: The Puppet Master

A/N: Can you believe it? I actually managed to release a new chapter in less than a month! I'm surprised myself! Just a note, this will be the last arc for this story. If I follow my new plot summary correctly (I had to make another one, bummer) there will only be 9 or 10 chapters left. I will try my best to update as fast as I can since I will be going back to school for my masters degree and will be busy soon.

This arc will be the hardest for Akane so please bear with her. I want to thank everyone who leaves reviews telling me how much they love her as I do know that OCs are not commonly well-liked in stories like these. To the regular reviewers, OniKushita, RedStar8, Jinxes, and to many others (you know who you are) thank you so much. To the new readers, welcome aboard! You never fail to make me smile and encourage me to write more. I also want to give a shout out to allylovesklaus who is one of the first few people who supported me when I was still starting. She was my inspiration for Sakura's character so kudos to her for giving me an idea of her appearance and personality.

I promise all the questions on the new happenings in the story will be answered soon. they have their own shining moments of reveal so please bear with me. Also, i just realized i am 2 reviews away from getting 200. help me reach it? Okay, i've already babbled enough, enjoy!

\* \* \*

><p>The night sky hurtled before her eyes at a dizzying pace. Akane made a pained sound which merely came out as weak gurgle from the back of her throat. She was being dragged unceremoniously across the littered forest floor, the grass and fallen leaves providing very little cushion to her aching back. She was choking from the gag forcefully pushed on her mouth and there was a steady, burning pain on her throat from being pulled by the collar.<p>

Above her, she can faintly see Hotaru's flaming red hair bobbing like a bright torch in the night. The girl was rough with her but she noted a deadly, graceful calm in her movements that chilled her to the bone. She was dragging her so effortlessly for her lithe frame that it suddenly made her wonder if she was really human. Unfortunately, she wasn't given enough chance to wallow on the thought when the girl suddenly threw her roughly, sending her body hurtling towards the ground.

White dots of pain flashed underneath her scrunched eyelids as she hit the forest floor. With her hands bound, Akane had no other choice but to slightly cushion her fall with her shoulder. A strange pressure on her joints, unfortunately, told her she might have broken something.

'Ohâ€| is the fragile, little, princess hurting? Surely, you had it worse from all those fights you had before, right?'

Akane opened her eyes and directed a glare at the girl before her. Hotaru was smiling at her sweetly but her eyes were burning bright with something that made her almost recoil. She looked manic. She was no longer the girl she watched from afar in the headquarters whose innocence and beauty she once envied. Hair wild and mouth twisted in a satisfied leer, she reminded Akane of a lion ready to pounce on a helpless victim.

'Ahhâ€| I like your eyes. I've always thought them pretty,' the girl said in a soothing voice that was completely out of odds in the current situation. Hotaru approached her stealthily like a predator, stopped, and knelt before her to stroke her face. She tried her hardest not to flinch and vomit.

'They've always been so enchanting. I was not mistaken when I guessed they would be magnificent when they look up to you in hatred,' she whispered as she ran a finger down the side of her face. Akane growled but the sound she made only caused the redhead's smile to widen. 'Oh, I'm sorry. You can't speak, right? How mean of me, letting you stay with that gag,' the girl giggled as she leaned closer to pull off the obstructing piece of cloth.

Cold, pure, air rushed to Akane's throat as the cloth cramped on her mouth was finally removed. She would have coughed, would have taken her time to get used to the normal supply of air on her lungs again but instead she whipped her head towards the girl angrily.

'Who are you? Why are you doing this?'

Hotaru didn't even flinch. She simply smiled at her as if she's an old friend she's catching up with over tea.

'Who am I? You know me. I'm Hotaru. The girl you saved.'

'You're a traitor!' Akane shouted, propping her body up so that she can see her more clearly.

'Oh yes, I am. And a good one, if I must say. I've fooled you and all your other shallow captain friends. I'm not that happy though. Since even in the end I wasn't able to convince Souji. The only consolation is that you've provided me enough entertainment,' the girl paused and gave a trill of laughter that made the hairs on her neck stand on end. 'Oh you should have seen yourself! Pouting, red eyes, all gloom. Your misery was so glorious, I can still taste it on my tongue!'

The words were scathing but Akane only caught some of it before she felt a rush of anger inside as she mentioned his name. Her blood boiled. It sounded dirty in her voice.

'Why are you doing this?'

Hotaru suddenly stopped laughing and looked at her innocently.

'I was bored. I needed something to do.'

'You were boreâ€|' she was just about to burst into a raging tirade

when the girl suddenly lunged forward and gripped her face again with her strong fingers. Madness simmered beneath her dead, black eyes as she spoke in a chilling voice.

'Yes, I was bored. I was bored after you and your dogs killed my master and shut down our operations.'

A sudden realization hit her, causing Akane to slightly widen her eyes. In the back of her mind, she heard Hijikata's voice telling her about the officer of the shadow group many months ago.

'You're the general. It was you all along,' she whispered more to herself than to the girl. Hotaru's smile curled into a satisfied and proud smirk.

'Yes. I am the general of the Kageno Senshi Tachi. I was the one who asked all those girls to be kidnapped. I must thank you, you played by my game so well, little bird, that I effortlessly infiltrated the Shinsengumi.'

Bile rose to Akane's throat. She felt like throwing up.

'Was it also a part of your plan to kill your master's strongest rasetsu?' she asked with venom in her voice. The redhead, however, looked unaffected.

'He was annoying and didn't know his place. He felt like he could rule over the group just because of this new power he had. So I had to take care of him. Don't you think it is the perfect plan? I get you to kill him and you to invite me with open arms to your group,' she sighed, her face taking on a somber expression. It merely lasted seconds, however, before her lips twisted again into a sick smile that lit her face up with a weird glow.

'You're crazy.'

Hotaru's pleased smirk hovered over her perfect, cupid bow lips for a moment before her face made yet another sudden transformation. In a flash, her expression melted into a manic one, her eyes wide and glaring, teeth almost bared at her like a predator. She jumped towards her and took her face again in her hands, this time making sure that her sharp nails dug to her flesh.

'I'm crazy? Yes! I am crazy. I am crazy because you-!'

'Hotaru. Is that how I taught you to treat our guests?'

The anger boiling inside Akane's chest dissipated as fast as Hotaru's expression changed again at the sound of a voice from the shadows. It almost felt like routine. Coldness was slowly seeping through her chest, choking her. A tingling sensation on the back of her head has started and she was suddenly overwhelmed with emotions so pure she wanted to scream and run. It was both terror and anger. It was the feel of death.

She didn't need to look. Didn't need to turn around to know what was standing there behind her in the shadows of the wide-trunked trees. Akane found herself staring at Hotaru's eyes which now glistened with another much horrifying expression. Wonder and worship. She felt like

staring at cold obsidian glass, her fear reflected through them.

She barely heard a leaf turn yet she felt his presence there. As if cold, invisible hands touched her, Akane felt an invisible force urge her to look around.

He stood there, beautiful as usual. Shadows danced around him like small fairies, kissing his pale skin, worshiping him. He was like a crow blending in with the nightâ€"all dark and grace. Solid. Breathing.

And very much alive.

He gave a smile that made the moon weep and the night turn darker.

'Hello, love. It's nice to see to see again.'

\* \* \*

><p>'Souji, what happened? Who took her?'<p>

Okita gritted his teeth as he wound his way around the trees, sword glistening and poised for attack. It was the third time he had heard that question already, only this time it was spoken by Heisuke. Again, he chose not to answer. There was a strange sensation on his stomach, as if he had eaten something alive that decided to create a racket in his innards. His mind was buzzing and his palms were itching to do somethingâ€"anything. He kept his lips pursed despite knowing his comrades needed some answers. With his state, he doubt he will be capable of saying anything other than swear words.

It was a few hours after midnight when he suddenly became aware of a shifting in his surroundings. Okita went to bed uneasy and worried after hearing Akane's source of stress. He doesn't want to believe that the man was still alive. He had personally watched the light slowly fade away from his eyes that night in the dungeons after all. Yet the moment he heard her say it, he felt the familiar feeling of foreboding that he always have when something was amiss.

He was proven correct that night when he burst into Akane's empty room. His quarters are a couple of doors and a hallway down from hers so he had to work double if he wanted to keep an eye out on any changes near her area that night. Sure enough, a few soft thumps common to a struggling victim woke him up from his shallow sleep a little past midnight. He could still remember the sickening feeling that struck him when he tore the door open and saw nothing but rumpled blankets in the room. In less than five minutes, the captains were running towards him in worry, eyes blurry and strained from being woken up but swords ready at their sides.

'Soujiâ€" Hijikata started but stopped when he gave him a glare.

'Later. Right now we need to find her,' Okita forced the words through gritted teeth as he hacked an obstructing branch of a low tree out of his way.

'At least tell us who we need to save her from,' it was Sannan this time, chillingly calm yet sharp as always. Souji felt a pang of

frustration towards the man. If only he can be that logical right now.

'Ayato. She thinks it is him. She told me earlier.'

His words were met with silence. Okita could feel their confusion but felt thankful that they did not probe more. His mind is only focused on one thing right now. They couldn't have made it that far. The kidnapper was faster than what he gave him credit for but he, Sannan, Heisuke, Hijikata, and Saitoâ€"the ones who heard the noiseâ€"were off in less than three minutes to catch up. They \*\*need\*\* to find her. There is no other option for him. He needs to get her back.

The anxiety pumping in his veins surged even more intensely as an image of her wide-eyed and scared flashed through his mind. His emotion overriding him, he unconsciously cut off another branch he was passing rather viciously to blow off some steam. The loss of the blockage made him stop. Straight ahead, he could see faint glimmers of light. A closer look revealed a clearing in the middle of a thick patch of trees. A deadly calm settled in his flesh as he looked at it. Around him, he could also feel the captains shifting. They didn't need to speak to at all. They all but stood there, listening closely. A second passed. Two. Then, like the wolves they've always been called, they prowled for the hunt.

\* \* \*

><p>'Ayato. '<p>

It was merely a whisper. Akane could almost swear she could see her breath turn into dark wisps and float towards the darkness surrounding the man. Everything was suddenly blurry in her eyes except for him, as if she is a moth unable to look away from a deadly flame.

She uttered his name with pure terror but Ayato smiled at her as if she said it with affection.

'It's been a while. Have you been longing for me as much as I did for you?'

Invisible insect legs made their way down her arms and back at what he said. She urged herself to focus. To breathe.

'You're supposed to be dead.'

Ayato's perfect dark brows arched as if he were a professor challenged by his mere student.

'Should I? Did you see me fall and bleed? Did you bury my body and see it rot under the soft soil?'

'Souji. H-He killed you,' she countered in a trembling voice. Akane felt shaken and faint but she tried her best not to show weakness by blatantly recoiling in fear.

Ayato did not answer for a while. His face was as placid as always but she can tell he was analyzing something as his blood-colored eyes scoured her face. Finally, he looked at Hotaru.

'You said they weren't together when you infiltrated them, yes?'

The girl, who had been silent ever since the man's arrival, gave a slight bow as she answered. 'Yes, master. I am sure of that.'

Ayato stared at her for a while before returning her gaze to her. Slowly, his lips curled into a smirk.

'I see. So that means you are finally together now,' he cooed in a voice filled with malice. Slowly, he approached her until he was a mere feet away from her face. 'I would have loved to say congratulations,' he reached out for a tendril of her hair and started playing with it between the tip of his fingers, finally making her flinch. 'But I'm so sorry to say that I need to cut your fun this short.'

Akane, with her hands still bound, tried her best to wriggle out of his reach. She was suffocating despite being in open air. As if the mere presence of the man alone rid her of her very breath.

'You can't do that. No matter how hard you try. You won't be able to do that.'

'Ahâ€| the trust of young love. How sweet and loyal is it? This will definitely make thingsâ€|more fun for me.'

'I will never go with you! I would rather die than give you my blood! I will never do it!' she shouted and lunged towards him in anger. Before she can even properly close the distance, however, she cried at the feel of her hair being yanked back viciously again. Amidst the shocking blur of pain in her scalp, she could hear Hotaru chanting above her in a hushed voice.

'How dare youâ€"guts to shout at Masterâ€"you bitchâ€"kill you and rip your flesh apartâ€"make you scream so hard you would wish you weren't boâ€"'

'Hotaru. Let go of her,' Akane heard Ayato's low, calm voice speak from somewhere beyond her.

'Hell, I will give youâ€"you will regretâ€"I promise I'm going toâ€"' the redhead was almost shouting now. The grip on her hair was tightening with every word that fell from her lips and Akane tried her best to deal with the pain by squeezing her eyes shut.

'Hotaru.'

Still no reaction.

'Hotaru. Now.'

Like a light switched off, the fire on the girl's face went out and was replaced by a blank, almost confused expression. The grip on Akane's hair loosened and she collapsed on the ground, teeth gritted in pain against the lingering burn in her scalp.

'I deeply apologize, I did not train her to be that harsh. She was already a broken doll when I got her. I did try my best to fix her though.'

System still overridden with shock and agony, Akane could not bring herself to analyze what the man just said. She made a huge effort, however, to shelf it on the back of her mind for future thinking. That is, if she'll live.

'You are both,' she panted and squirmed against the ground to right herself again. The hard, pebbled soil rubbed against her skin but she ignored it. 'You are both sick in the head.'

'Ah, but isn't that a bad thing to say to your kind, my dear. After all you are one of us andâ€'

'Please don't embarrass yourself. You cannot liken gold fleece to a spider's web.'

Akane started at the sound of a familiar voice from behind the man. Eyes widening with hope, she caught sight of a glint of something that suddenly appeared out of the darkness. The glow was different from the light spilled by the moon. It was cold, unforgiving, and solid. She knew that light so well. She saw that glint bounce off her own sword many times already.

He emerged the same time that Ayato's smirk widened. A burst of relief flooded her body as Okita stepped into the moonlit washed part of the clearing, his stance graceful as always but with his weapon held high. Her face which was contorted with pain just a few seconds ago lit up as she smiled. His eyes didn't slip towards her to check but she knew, even from afar that he was asking for confirmation of her status. She gave a nod which he caught in his peripheral vision.

'Finally. I've been waiting for you,' Ayato said as he turned his body 90 degrees so that she and Okita were both within his vision.

'I'm flattered. You need not drag Akane here though just to catch my attention. You know you could have written me a love letter if you want me in your bedchambers,' Souji said with snark, even waving a hand offhandedly as if he was speaking to a girl pining for him.

Ayato 's sneer widened. 'Oh it would be such a pleasure to rip that tongue off your mouth.'

Okita matched the man's confident smirk before the accommodating light in his eyes turned cold and serious. He was still smiling but his gaze has already become twin blocks of green ice.

'It's time to give her back, don't you think?'

'Why, did you lay claim on her already?'

'Have you reviewed your resources? She's been mine ever since she stepped foot here.'

Ayato fell silent for a while and settled on watching the man. He had an assessing look on him, as if he's trying to figure out the best way to deal with him. Then, slowly, he reached for the katana strapped on his hips and pulled it off the sheath so fast, the light

glinting off the blade seemed to slice the darkness. In front of him, Okita matched him by shedding off his casual fighting stance.

'If that's the case, then I guess I just need to kill you again, right? Surely you wouldn't be lucky this time. What do you say of it, Okita Souji? You and me, blade versus blade, one more time.'

'That sounds romantic,' Okita said in a voice so casual, it sounded strange with the current offensive air he was giving. His sword looked like a beam of moonlight in the air, ready to strike any time. 'Unfortunately, I brought party over. I sure hope you don't mind.'

At his words, Akane's head shot up to peer around her. The darkness beyond the first few rows of trees were as silent and unmoving as ever that she thought he was only bluffing. Behind her, Hotaru moved in closer and grabbed her arm. Her grip on her was urgent, as if she was seeing something she hadn't caught up yet. She struggled against her hold.

'Do not even try.'

The crunch of a brittle branch stick made them freeze. Okita's smirk widened. Then, like hunters, four figures emerged from the darkness, surrounding the clearing.

'Akane, are you okay?' Heisuke, who appeared behind Hotaru asked. She nodded her head. Behind her, Hotaru tightened her grip around her even more, causing her to wince.

'Let the girl go,' Saito was saying from her left. Her kidnapper only bared her teeth in response.

'What do you want from her?' Sannan, who stood beside Souji asked in a chillingly calm voice. He had on the look that Akane always found so terrifying. Calm but deadly.

'Attacking as a pack like the wild dogs you have always been called, I see,' Ayato said in a smooth voice, his blood-red eyes glinting maliciously. There was not a shred of terror or even worry in his body. 'I thought you were all about honor. Where is the honor in this?'

His remark was first met by silence. Finally, Hijikata spoke from Souji's other side.

'You wanted us to come here. Tell us what you want.'

'I don't know what you are talking about.'

'Don't shit with us. If you really wanted to get her you would have whisked her away instead of stopping here. Where are your rasetsus? You never leave without them. You're not here to fight, you wanted to lure us out.'

The demon's face was impassive for a while as he stared at the vice-commander. Then, he smiled. He almost looked impressed.

'I didn't know you had something in that country bumpkin skull of yours,' he said as he made a movement with his sword. The five made a

collective shifting as if ready to attack but stopped as he merely sheathed his katana back to his scabbard. Souji's eyes flickered towards the weapon but kept his offensive stance.

'Why do I want her?' Ayato murmured as if asking himself the question. 'Are you sure you don't know yet? Because I have already told her the reason the day she went with me in exchange for your commander,' he waved a hand towards her. 'Don't tell me! She hasn't told you yet?'

At this, the captains all looked at her briefly, confusion quickly flashing through their eyes before making them settle back on the oni. Akane froze. She can feel something cold gathering fast inside her. It felt like a huge block of ice was solidifying in her stomach. Guilt and panic filled her and made her breathing shallow. He wouldn't. He wouldn't do it, right?

'It is not our hobby to snoop around things we don't have any business with. Especially when it involves a creeper who can't keep his pants on for a girl who clearly doesn't have any interest in him,' it was Souji who decided to break the silence, his tone light yet scathing. One glance at him and she knew that he had already figured what Ayato was doing.

The oni gave a laugh, both cruel and condescending at the same time. 'You think I want her because of that reason? You think this wasn't your business? You stupid humans always amuse me with your notions on emotional longing.'

'Enough with your speech. We don't have all night,' Hijikata spoke this time through gritted teeth. He gave a quick nod to Saito and Heisuke who stepped a little forward, swords menacing and deadly. 'We don't know why you're alive when you're supposed to be rotting underground but we won't have any second thoughts in giving you back your former deceased status.'

Despite the threat, Ayato merely inclined his head and remained collected in the middle of the ring the captains have formed around him. If anything, he looked merely amused as if he was watching a show he directed unfold exactly how he wanted in his front of his eyes.

'Have you ever wondered why my rassetsus are so different from the failures you have managed to spew out from your research?'

Nobody answered. The question seemed out of the blue but Akane knew better. She swallowed in a frail hope of calming the heart thundering wildly in her chest now.

'It's because I have one ingredient you don't have,' Ayato said, his eyes seeming to be glowing in the darkness. 'My blood. Demon blood.'

Everyone was still for a while. Her heart was on her throat now, ready to burst from her body. Finally Heisuke spoke up, confusion clearly etched on his tone.

'That is bullshit, there is no such thing as demons!'

'That is what you useless, prideful humans think,' Ayato snapped,

annoyance and loathing slipping into his voice. 'Where did you think you got the inspiration for the super humans you were creating? Extraordinary speed and strength? Ability to heal wounds? From us. The onis who are supposed to be ruling over you. You are trying to make copies of us out of your desire to have a taste of our greatness.'

Okita was just about to speak up when Sannan slightly raised his free hand to silence him. A closed off look has fallen over the lieutenant's features now which made Akane shiver.

'But you weren't able to do it. I have seen the results of your experiments and they're nothing more than useless, broken men. That is why I decided to change things up a bit on my side,' Ayato continued, his demeanor back to his usual chilly calm again. A ghastly smirk split his handsome face as he watched the captains with his steely gaze. He was reveling on the current situation. Prolonging it as long as he can. 'I added my blood in the ochimizu.'

The men's reactions were different. Okita's eyes widened a fraction, Hijikata's scowl deepened, and Sannan tightened his jaw. Behind her, Akane heard Heisuke gasp while Saito merely tightened his hold on his sword.

'It was a success, in some way. Mine were stronger, faster. There was only one problem. The furies you created take a while to finally descend to madness. The ones I created turn rabid fast. Demon blood is too strong for a human body to handle and that is the price they pay for being levels higher in strength and skills than your creations,' he paused and leaned his head to the side, smirk still in place. 'I actually thought it was hopeless. I needed new soldiers who can help me take over the humans but all I was able to create were killing machines. And you see, it is not much fun when there is no one left to rule over because everyone has been slaughtered,' he paused with a nonchalant look on his face. It didn't last long, however, as he looked at her then at the captains. 'Then I discovered something. I have one of the essential ingredients. But you here you have the other one.'

Akane clenched her fists despite her still bound hands. Her heart, beating wildly earlier, now felt still as the captains all seemed to slowly look at her in realization.

'Yes, her. Didn't she tell you of her roots? She's an oni like me. Not a full-one. She's unfortunately as human as the rest of you but her ancestors were pure demons. Through the years her blood has been diluted, dirtied, as their clan married to humans. But the trace is still there,' Ayato continued, nodding towards her direction.

'Ironically, as much as I hate the act of copulating with humans, that dirtied blood served as my salvation. You see, her blood has been diluted enough to exactly balance mine. Being a pureblood, mine is so strong that it pushes the rasesus I create into madness. But with the help of her thinned blood, she was able to lessen that effect. She is mostly human, therefore making the ochimizu infused with my blood easier to handle by other humans. At the same time, she has a trace of demon in her so that she doesn't exactly cancel the benefits of my blood.'

A chill has fallen in the air. Everyone, except for Hotaru and Ayato were in shock. But he wasn't finished yet.

'The result is amazing. It was a miracle. With our blood combined to the ochimizu, a new breed of rasetsus was born. They were faster, stronger, but at the same time they were able to retain their consciousness. Their healing prowess have also significantly improved,' he was speaking so fast now, Akane guessed that he had already forgotten where he is and who he is talking to. 'Do you remember that one you have battled in the collapsed building? That was proof of one. The man drank her blood when she saved you,' Ayato pointed to Souji who was currently wearing an unreadable expression on his face.

A rush of cold air flitted over the clearing, rustling the leaves on the tops of the trees and their kimonos. Everybody was silent. Akane was shivering not from the cold but from something else. She tried to focus her attention inwards to herself to try to identify itâ€"to escape what is currently happening in front of her.

'Why are you telling us this? What do you get from it?' It was Sannan who spoke first.

'Why? To expose her for what she really is. A liar. She knew about this before. Yet she chose to stay silent. You look at me as evil but she is no better than I,' he turned to Okita then, a malicious leer in his face. 'This girl you are in love with is a monster. Like you and me.'

Something broke inside Akane. Her eyes lifted towards Souji almost desperately only to be paralyzed by a stabbing pain in her chest as she met his eyes. There was pain thereâ€"betrayal. She wanted to call out to him. To tell him sorry but nothing came out of her.

'What you've done serves you no purpose. We still won't give her to you,' Hijikata said, his tone absolute and sure. Ayato merely looked at him and smiled.

'You still don't get it, do you? It doesn't matter whether you want to give her or not. I robbed her from right under your noses tonight. I can get her anytime,' he turned and walked towards Akane, stopping just beside her. Saito and Heisuke were just about to slash him when Hijikata raised a hand to temporarily stall them. The demon knelt in front of her and tilted her head towards him, his lips just inches from her skin.

'But right now, I prefer seeing you all suffer. It is a luxury I can afford,' he said, the fingers holding her releasing her. They burned her skin like white hot metal. 'I suggest you prepare yourselves though. Because the game has just begun.'

Akane didn't know what happened next. All she knew was that there was a gust of air that suddenly stormed in the space where Ayato and Hotaru stood. The next thing she knew, they were left alone in the clearing. She in the middle of the other captains who were all looking at her.

But she didn't mind their gazes. Her eyes were only focused on one set right now. She had never dared look away from them since earlier, afraid of what she might no longer see there the moment she meets

them again. Souji's eyes were stormy and shrouded with something she can't recognize.

Within her, she finally identified the feeling that is still making her shiver.

It was shame.

\* \* \*

><p>'Oni? The leader of the shadow group is a what?'<p>

'That's what he identified himself to be.'

'That sounds preposterous. Maybe he is trying to throw us off track.'

'We thought he was dead. He could have just operated under the radar if he wanted to make things easier for him. But he specifically went through all the trouble to announce his return. That is the exact opposite of throwing us off track. He's the one who pursued us.'

'It's because he needed something from us. Akane.'

Okita gritted his teeth at the name. He was leaning against the wall next to the door, his eyes fixed on the flickering candlelight in the middle of the room. He watched the flame lengthen and shorten as he listened to Hijikata, Kondou, and Sannan's discussion. It was 3 in the morning and an emergency meeting has been called after they have returned to the headquarters. Also in the room as silent as him were Saito and Heisuke, the two others who have witnessed what happened earlier.

The men threw their gazes over to his direction almost collectively. Still, he kept his silence. There is nothing he needs to say. Yet.

Sannan, taking his silence as an affirmation to push through about the subject, decided to speak on.

'We need to do something about her. If what he said is true, she is both an asset and a liability,' the lieutenant said in his quiet voice. Beside him, Kondou shifted as if he was uncomfortable. Saito was stoic in his seat as usual while Heisuke threw another furtive look towards Okita's direction.

'What are you proposing?' Hijikata asked, his expression serious yet closed off. His voice sounded neutral but everyone in the room knew that he already knew the answer to his question. The smartest and most cunning in the group, the two were really worthy of holding the next highest positions after the commander. They shared a connection that only generals of the same army could ever have. And right now, he was clearly interrogating the other for the sake of letting their soldiers know what is happening in the other's mind.

'Protect her, as we should. She can be a huge threat once she fell on the hands of the Kageno Senshi Tachi,' Sannan answered mildly. Across the room, Hijikata kept his stare steady on him. He and Okita waited silently, knowing full well that there is more to come.

'And inform the Bakufu of her existence. Have someone take a closer look at her.'

Souji's eyes narrowed. He felt his throat constrict as if he wanted to puke. Still he kept silent, waiting for more. Around him, the room was quiet. Hijikata was staring at Sannan as if weighing the words he was about to say.

'You do realize that the Bakufu will propose to use her in the event that they get to know about her lineage,' the vice-commander finally spoke up after a while. At his words, Kondou and Heisuke looked up as if scandalized. Saito and Okita, however, remained silent like twin kettles boiling under a fire.

'Use her? You mean use her for experiments?' Heisuke finally spoke up, looking from one man to the next with a troubled expression on his face. 'Hey, Hijikata-san, is that what you mean?'

'That is not the main purpose of this proposal. She needs proper protection,' Sannan calmly answered, his eyes fixed on Hijikata. His expression looked almost disinterested but the light in his eyes and the set of his lips told everyone that he is adamant on the subject.

'We can give her protection here.'

'She was kidnapped right from under our noses.'

'We weren't prepared.'

'We cannot afford to have someone watch over her. Our men are few and overtaxed already.'

'Turning her over into the hands of the Bakufu is a sure path for her to be used on the experiment regarding the ochimizu. Whether she wants to or not. That doesn't seem right. She is a member of the Shinsengumi after all.'

'Isn't that the same reason for her to help us move forward with the experiment? If you don't remember, Hijikata-san, we also use our own soldiers for the rassetsus.'

'Soldiers who have disobeyed our rules,' Hijikata said with more tension now, his brows furrowed. 'It was their choice to take the medicine. She hasn't done anything wrong to be placed in the same predicament.'

'Except not tell us the truth.'

That was the most he could stomach. Souji finally looked up, his hand gripping the scabbard of the sword resting beside him. When he spoke, his words came out as a low grumble from his chest. He had spent the rest of the night not saying anything despite Akane throwing him furtive looks as they made their way back to the headquarters earlier. He knew she was worried about his reaction. What she didn't realize, however, is that there is something much bigger she should be stressing about. Okita was aware of what was coming in this meeting and had spent moments in silence trying to work around it inside his head.

'Nobody is going to use her for any experiment,' he finally said to no one in particular. Both Sannan and Hijikata snapped free from their heated discussion and looked at him.

'She's going to stay here. With us. She's better handled here.'

'Okita-sanâ€"'

'If it is the matter about her protection, you don't have to worry. I'll take over it. I'll take responsibility. But I wouldn't let anyone lay a finger on her especially for the sake of that goddamn experiment,' he spat out, his eyes glimmering with something heavy and dark. He respects the man deeply for all his wisdom and loyalty and knew full well of the lengths he is willing to go for the sake of the Shinsengumi. But this is not something he can just let pass. Just thinking about how Akane looked up at him earlier as she was told to wait in her room was already enough to turn his stomach upside down. He knew she did her own share of mistakes-for which he wanted to confront her later-but there is no way that he'll let anyone lay a finger on her while he's there. Not the shadow group nor the Shinsengumi itself.

'Her contribution can completely turn things around. This is a win or lose situation for us. Either she helps in strengthening our rassetsus or she's used against us and the whole of Japan.'

'She doesn't owe us anything, Sannan-san,' he felt his blood slowly crawling under his skin, dark, thick, and hot. His knuckles were white from the grip he had on his sword and he was barely keeping himself from not shouting.

'She lied to us, Okita,' the man's words were like a whip that slapped him across the face. He was highly aware of that fact. If he was going to be honest with himself, he would admit it hurt him a little. 'She kept vital information that would have placed us in a very tight position in the event that she was compromised. She placed us at risk.'

'Ayato was dead. I killed him. She did not lie to us. She merely chose not to share information because she thought the threat was already gone,' he continued speaking, only barely following his own logic. Listening to his own words now, Souji felt almost detached to himself. He knew he sounded foolish. Like a guilty criminal trying to grasp at straws to defend himself. This isn't like him. Not him at all. He's angry, confused, defiant. Beneath the mix of emotions churning inside him, however, he was most of all surprised.

Okita is aware of his tendencies. Of how much he can lose his mind and cool when Kondou-san is concerned. But for him to do the same for her? He knew his feelings for the girl but for the first time ever, he came to realize how much he had already allowed her inside. One of the things that made him feel so comfortable around Akane was the fact that he knew she wouldn't question where his loyalties lie. He can continue caring about the man he so looked up to as always without her demanding anything. It was only right now, when her existence and purpose was challenged that he took a closer look of how he saw her. His actions, his thoughts, his decisions, it all morphed, letting her in that small space he only allowed for certain

people.

'This is ridiculous. This isn't making any sense!' Sannan frowned at him and looked at Kondou and Hijikata as if he just gave up trying to reason with him. 'She is our soldier and therefore under our charge as her superiors. This is the most sensible thing to do.'

'No,' from his seat, Okita looked at the lieutenant, his face suddenly calm. The venomous feelings of anger boiling inside him earlier were gone, as if it was a mere fog that dissipated into the air. Left behind was a certain clarity and something much more important.

An added purpose in life he is willing to fight for.

'She's not just our soldier. She's mine. My woman. I'm still a captain of this group and I lay personal claim and responsibility over her. And nobody is allowed to touch her unless I say so.'

He looked at each man in the room, as if making sure all of them got his message. He knew it is a losing battle. The Shinsengumi had strict rules that sometimes lead to death when disobeyed. Also included in it, however, is the silent pack to protect the interests of a fellow brother. And right now, Akane is his as he was hers.

'I'll be going ahead,' Souji finally said as the room kept still. He stood up from his seat and opened the door, finally ready to face her again. He was just about to step out when he suddenly stopped as he came face to face with someone standing at the threshold. A girl with long dark locks trailing behind her back and shoulders was staring at him openly, a thoughtful look on her face. She was dressed rather formally, with her expensive looking yellow kimono and purple sheath wrapped around her. He blinked at her in surprise.

He only unfroze when a sudden shifting in the darkness behind her brought him to his senses. In seconds, Okita's sword was out of its scabbard and poised for attack. The girl, however, held out one hand to stop him before he could do anything more.

'Please, we're not here to cause trouble,' the brunette said in a light, lilting voice. Behind her, a taller woman with black hair and strange clothing finally appeared.

'Who are you? How did you get in?' he asked suspiciously, hand steady on the hilt of his sword. He felt the other captains stirring behind him as well.

The girl put down her hand and gave a bow. Her hazel brown eyes seemed to light up when she spoke.

'Good evening. I am Senhime. And I am here to offer you a proposal.'

### 33. AnnouncementII

Hello everyone! Yes, I am still alive. How long has it been already? 5 months? 7 months? To be honest, I've lost count. First and

foremost, I want to apologize for suddenly dropping this story. A lot has happened to me. Taking my Masters has taken the most out of me and I landed a new job in an advertising agency recently. It has taken a lot of my time and energy -sometimes i don't even sleep for two days- that I have lost my inspiration for this fanfiction during those times. Today though, I felt like I have already taken too much stress from everything that I decided to check my profile here...

Only to find out that there are still people who are waiting for me here.

I have received messages asking me how much they love this story and how they are willing to wait for Akane and Souji to come back.

There were comments with the same idea as well.

Honestly, I didn't expect that people would still care even after I was gone for so long.

So right now, I am working on the next chapter. All of these messages are very heartwarming and it gave me the push I needed to continue it. I could feel Akane smiling somewhere inside me, urging me to continue writing this story and find her again.

Thank you very much guys. This really means a lot to me.

Okay, enough of drama. Here is one thing I promise you. I will publish the next chapter this weekend. And as proof, I've pasted a snippet here just to show that I'm really working on it:

'Give me your word, Akane.'

'Y-Yes.'

The crack in her voice made him smile a little. It was a tired one but it was at least a smile.

'Say that again without trying to stutter this time,' he whispered to her, his hand lifting to the back of her head. Slowly, he pulled her towards him in an embrace.

Akane gaped for a moment. Then the tears started flowing again. She cleared her throat.

'Yes. I promise.'

He chuckled. 'You'll be the death of me,' the arm around her waist pulled her closer and cradled her. She raised her arms around him in response and clung on to him. This wasn't what she was expecting at all. She expected him to be so angry he would abandon her. But here he is now, holding her gently.

Alright! I will be back next weekend. Again, thank you very much for your patience. \*kisses to all of you\* :3

34. Chapter 31: Blood and Fire

A/N: Hello there! As promised, here is the next chapter for this

story. Again, thank you very much for all the lovely messages and comments you left. I wouldn't be able to name all of you but I'm sure you all know who you are. All of these support from you made me even more fired up to have this next part published. Just a fair warning though... because it has been more than a while since I wrote, I fear I wasn't able to bring back the old style of writing i used before for this fanfiction. I really tried but of course, i will have to stretch my writing prowess a little more to get back on track. I would also want to thank user Harritsu for offering to draw Akane for me. I'm sorry dearie if I wasn't able to reply to you on time. I will once I have this published, I swear.

So there you have it, i'm not really promising this chapter to be a sunny one but yeah, i needed to do it to get things moving. Again, thank you every one for waiting for this and i hope you enjoy. :)

\* \* \*

><p>Dust motes dancing lazily at the young light of the morning. The swaying of the sturdy yet stiff branches of the sakura trees outside. The soft rustling of papers. The silence that echoed back as the message she can't see was read by attentive eyes.</p>

Akane stepped away from her tatami mat and peered at the small crack of her door. Outside was a spacious lobby now bathed with slivers of golden light streaming from the ornate windows at the far wall. It is just a couple of minutes after sunrise and the air still held the cold bite of dawn. Looking at the lobby, it was not difficult for her to find his figure in the dimness of the room. He was still wearing his yukata and his hair was still loose from its usual tie as he read the letter slipped under the door of the house at the dead of the night.

That had been going on for 3 days now. Every night she tried to catch a glimpse of the stranger who brought them and failed. Every crack of dawn he sat in the lobby, reading them before she can get a chance to get them. Every day she watched him, not letting him know that she was aware of the messages and that the only reason she never tried to take a look at them was because of her fear of what she might know.

Now as she watched his profile melt into a worried expression, flashes of what happened the night Ayato came back washed over her again. For a moment everything around her seemed to shift until she found herself sitting on her own room back at the headquarters, cold, alone, and afraid.

\* \* \*

><p><em>3 days earlier...</em>

She waited silently and obediently as her superiors have instructed, her eyes staring blankly at her pale hands. Akane knew she should be scared. Her secrets have been revealed right in front of them after all-her origin, her lineage, her blood. They were probably discussing now about what to do with her, which, she is sure, won't be entirely in her favor.

She knew all of this and yet she just sat there calmly like a statue. Everything around her seemed to dissolve. Even her heart seemed to

beat slower. There was only one thing reflected in her mind at the moment and that was the image of him staring back at her at the clearing, his gaze filled with a storm of emotions. There was confusion. Worry. Betrayal.

Her heart ached as if she was stabbed with something dull. The wait is killing her. All she wanted was to talk to him but even then she felt like she wouldn't know where to start. '\_I'm sorry for keeping secrets.' 'I'm sorry for putting the group at risk.\_' The words were obvious but she knew they wouldn't be enough.

When she thought she would finally be driven crazy by her own thoughts, there was finally the sound of her door opening to save her from her musings. Akane's heart stopped when he saw him enter the room. She felt her body tense up, ready to welcome whatever deluge of harsh words he would say to her. However, Okita only went straight to her sword stand and reached out for her weapons without even looking at her.

'You need to pack up. We're leaving.'

Panic and confusion rose to her throat. His voice was cold and flat and he was moving as if in urgency.

She quickly stood up from her seat.

'Where are we going?'

'We can talk about it later.'

'But why are we leaving the headquartersâ€"'

'Akane. Just move,' Souji turned to look at her for the first time, causing her to freeze in her position. The emotions she saw in his eyes earlier were still there and there was tightness on the set of his jaw and lips. Her heart plummeted. He was still angry.

Silently, she went to pick up her clothes and started packing them on a small clothes sack. For a moment the room was silent except for the rustling of fabric. When she finally wasn't able to take it, she turned to him once more.

'Souji, I'm sorry. It wasn't my intention to put the Shinsengumi at riskâ€"'

'Later,' his voice sounded harder now and his grip on her bow tightened. She, on the other hand, snapped and whirled around to face him. This silence, this treatments-it's killing her. She needed to talk about this now if she wants to keep herself together.

'No. Listen to me! I was stupid. I know! I was only thinking about myself when I decided to not say anything. It was selfish andâ€"'

\*\*\_Bang!\_\*\*

The sharp sound of the wooden sword stand clattering as it was shoved to the floor silenced her. She cringed as Okita faced her, his face now clearly reflecting his anger.

'No. You listen to me,' his voice dropped a tone and he took a step towards her, his eyes gleaming in the darkness of her room. 'It isn't the fact that you kept secrets. I don't give a fucking damn about that. What I don't understand is how you could keep something from me that could cost your safety. Don't give me that bullshit about putting the Shinsengumi at risk. We know we could have handled that bastard if we were aware of what was happening, Akane. But we didn't. It was you he wanted all along and you knew that! I trusted you enough to tell me at least that.'

She stood there stunned for a while. Every word he said plunged deep into her heart like daggers and she couldn't grasp the words to answer him with.

'I-I'm sorryâ€"'

'Are you now? You did not put only yourself at risk. Kondou-san. The Shinsengumi. I have only three things that mattered to me Akane. Three. I couldn't care less about the world. I could watch it burn for all I care. But I had all those in danger of being ripped away from me in a snap without even knowing. Do you understand!'

'I do! I do okay?! I'm sorry, I do understand it! I'm sorry that I didn't even think of that before. I'm sorry that I was selfish!' she screamed back now, tears staining her cheeks. 'I'm sorry that I felt terrified you'll look at me differentlyâ€"that you'll consider me a monster! All my life I have been different. I have always been the alien,' her breathing came in gasps now and she shook as if she was freezing. She was barely keeping herself from collapsing to the floor and she had to ball her hands into fists in a weak effort to have some reign over her actions.

'When I arrived here I finally had the chance to start new. It was selfish. It was stupid. But I held on to that, Souji. Because finally I felt like I belong. And I didn't want to lose my home,' her last sentence came out in a pitiful shaking tone but she didn't care. Instead, she slowly turned her back away from him and held on to the corner of the mirror on her right to keep herself standing.

For a while nothing can be heard from the room except for her breathing. Then, when she felt like she was just about to physically break, she felt him touch her arm. She kept her face angled away from him, afraid of the expression she will see again on his face.

'Akane. Look at me.'

She shook her head no.

'Why?'

'Because I don't want to see how much you hate me.'

Silence.

'What are you saying?'

The sound of pure confusion in his voice temporarily stopped her and made her look at him.

'Are youâ€|you don'tâ€|hate me?'

The look on his face changed and he looked at her closely.

'I'm irritated at you. I don't hate you.'

Now it was her turn to look confused. She frowned at him and tried to make herself focus on the situation.

'Butâ€|after all that I did?'

Souji pursed his lips again. His face still looked clouded but it was kinder than it was earlier.

'Those are all done now. Right now we need to focus on fixing this.'

Akane nodded. She wanted to say more but knew she will probably make things worse again if she tried. Gently, she took a step away from him and resumed her packing.

'Where am I going?' she finally decided to ask after she tightened the knot on her clothes sack. She could hear him shuffling behind her, probably picking up the bow and her swords which he threw in his anger earlier. With the turn of events, she guessed the decision of the officers was to send her off somewhere for punishment. She didn't like the idea but who was she to complain after all she did? Truth be told she thought it would cost her her head.

'We are going hiding.'

Her hands suddenly stilled from tying the knot and she looked up at him in bewilderment.

'We? Whatâ€|No. No. You can't go with me. Kondou-san is here. They need you here.'

Okita looked at her as if she was crazy. There was a thunderous air sizzling around him now.

'Do you really want me to kill you right now, woman? Do you really think I could let you go off alone?' he countered back, his face daring her to challenge his decision.

But she only took a step towards him and glared back.

'Tearing you apart from the Shinsengumi is the last thing we all need. That is the last thing I will ever do.'

Souji's jaw twitched. He looked murderous. For a while Akane felt the need to take a step back as he closed the distance between them. Still, she decided to keep her ground to show her stubbornness. Unfortunately, he seemed defiant on doing the same as he stopped merely a foot from her. When he spoke again, his breath fanned the hair framing her face.

'You will listen to me right now. You need to stop that hobby of trying to carry things on your own. You already tried that and looked what happened. From now on, we are doing things our way. We. There isn't only you now. And if you think I will leave you alone then you

are damn well wrong about it,' he said to her in a whisper that sent chills running down her spine. 'Do you want to fight me about it?'

She swallowed. The closeness, his words, and the look on his eyes made her blindly nod.

'Give me your word, Akane.'

'Y-Yes.'

The crack in her voice made him smile a little. It was a tired one but it was at least a smile.

'Say that again without trying to stutter this time,' he whispered to her, his hand lifting to support the back of her head. Slowly, he pulled her towards him in an embrace.

Akane gaped for a moment. Then the tears started flowing again. A lot has happened tonight and things were finally catching up to her. With him holding her like that now, she found herself crying shamelessly and incessantly. And for once, she didn't care.

'Yes. I promise.'

Okita received her shaky words with a chuckle.

'One of these days, you'll definitely be the death of me,' he said gently, the arm around her waist pulling her closer to cradle her. She raised her arms around him in response and held on as if she was clinging for dear life. This wasn't what she was expecting at all. She expected him to be so angry he would abandon her. But here he is now, holding her gently.

That lasted for a few minutes. When she finally calmed down, he let her go and looked at her with the same smile he always wore.

'So, ready to go?'

She nodded her head apprehensively. 'Where are we going exactly though?'

Okita stooped to get her bow and quiver. 'To Edo.'

'Edo? Do we have a hide-out there?' she asked now with confusion as she picked up her clothes sack. Souji strapped the quiver on his back and threw her travel coat at her.

'No. But a certain Sen-hime offered us her house.'

\* \* \*

><p><em>Flashback:</em>

\_ 'My name is Sen-hime and this is my guardian, Kimigiku. We are here to propose you something,' the girl said softly as she regally arranged her hands over her lap. Sitting a little ways behind her was her companion whose eyes were cast politely towards the ground.\_

\_ It took a while before any of the captains answered. If anything,

they all looked a little too at edge with the way they were regarding the two strangers. \_

\_ 'Please be at ease, I am here to help youâ€" '\_

\_ 'Give me one reason on why we should trust you,' It was Okita who finally decided to break the silence, his tone sharp and cutting. The hand casually resting on the scabbard of his sword twitched. He had wasted enough time here already. He needed to get to Akane soon.

-

\_ 'Because I am just like Akane. I'm an oni,' Sen answered, her brown eyes meeting his gaze with calm. He gritted his teeth. Around the room, the other men shifted a little uncomfortably in their seats.\_

\_ 'That is not enough reason for us to trust you. The man we just faced tonight also claimed to be one and so far he had done nothing but harm her,' it was Hijikata who answered this time, his voice crisp and sharp. 'And another thing. We don't believe in demons. How can we be sure that you are not just some nut jobs who decided to meddle with us?' \_

\_ At his last scathing phrase, the dark-haired woman looked up and glared openly at the vice-commander. Her eyes have turned into slits and she looked like she was barely keeping herself from standing up in her seat.\_

\_ 'Please watch your words. This is Sen-hime you are talking to, a descendant of the great Suzuka Gozen. It is imprudent to talk to herâ€" '\_

\_ Before Kimigiku could continue her tirade, the smaller brunette raised her hand to silence her. The woman briefly looked at the other girl for a while before she resumed her polite stance again. Her hand shook slightly on her lap, however, and her jaw was set in anger.

-

\_ 'I understand your apprehensions. After all, us onis have been living in secret for centuries now. There were so few of us that our existence has melted in the background of you humans,' Sen answered lightly as a hand gracefully lifted to pull something from her obi. After a gentle tug, she produced an ornate dagger, its wooden case covered elegantly with gold and black trimmings.\_

\_ Everyone in the group seemed to move as one. Saitou and Heisuke who were closest to her quickly raised their swords from their scabbards and Hijikata and Souji moved so that they were almost shielding Kondou. The princess, however, seemed unbothered by it and calmly unsheathed her blade. Behind her, Kimigiku stared at the dagger with wide eyes, as if she was just about to watch something horrifying.\_

\_ 'I do not blame you though. After all, it has always been in your nature to never believe anything unless you see it with your own eyes,' Sen continued as she rolled the small hilt in her dainty palm. She raised her hand in a position of attack before bringing it down with force.\_

\_ 'Sen-hime, wait-! '\_

\_A bright glint flashed across the room like lightning before thunder. For a few seconds, the room was wracked with discord, with the captains ready to jump on the attack. Heisuke and Saito who were closest to the girl stopped a second before bringing down their swords, however, when they realized what happened. \_

\_Drops of red fell to the floor like the soft patterning of rain. In the middle of the room remained the girl, her other arm blossoming blood like a small stream. Her eyes looked straight into the vice-commander's shocked ones before it fell on her wound.\_

\_ 'Watch closely. Then you will believe.' \_

\_A different kind of silence wrapped the room after what happened next. As the captains watched, the edges of the wound moved slightly, like a flower unfolding gracefully inside itself. It didn't stop until the gash finally closed, leaving nothing but a trail of blood on the girl's smooth, porcelain skin. \_

\_ 'Sen-hime. You shouldn't have done that. You spilled your own blood,' Kimigiku was the one who spoke first, her voice low but reprimanding. Sen only smiled back at her before training her eyes towards the men once more.\_

\_ 'Onis like us have the capacity to heal. Besides from that, we are faster and stronger than any human. Ayato, the one you have been in pursuit with for a while now is a demon from the West. He hails from the Kazama line, a small yet powerful lineage of onis,' she explained with her light harmonious voice like a story teller telling her children about an ancient tale. She pulled a handkerchief from one of her sleeves and wiped the remaining blood on her skin.\_

\_ 'Canâ€|Akane do that as well? Self-healing?' For the first time ever since the women came, Sannan shattered his silence. He was as calm as ever but there was an undertone to his voice that made the princess frown.\_

\_ 'No. Akane is barely an oni herself,' Sen answered a little too sharply. She regarded the lieutenant for a while as if she was trying to figure something out about him. 'Onis with our strength and capabilities are pure-bloods. Akaneâ€|she came from a strong line of demons from the East. The demon trace running in her blood, however, is already thin. You wound her and she will die bleeding in front of your eyes.' \_

\_The graphic description made Souji grit his teeth. So she is more of a human than a demon thenâ€| which all the more makes him defiant to not give her to the Bakufu. \_

\_ 'Still, she is a child of our race. And I want to help her. I have heard that Ayato has taken a liking on her because of some evil reasons. And as someone who does not agree with his view as a demon, I want to offer her protection. I have a house in Edo which she can use as shelter. It is the only place that Ayato cannot trace.' \_

\_ 'How can you be sure that he can't follow her there? The man even managed to get back to life after I killed him,' Souji spoke up, his

eyes burning against the girl's own. He still felt reluctant, yes, but right now, he is willing to hold on to anything that can guarantee her safety. \_

\_Sen looked back at him with the same intensity playing in her eyes. She was weighing him... trying to figure out the source of his distress towards the girl. He was about to snap at the guest when Kimigiku, who seemed to have sensed the silent hostility that brewed between them, answered his question. \_

\_ 'As a daughter of the Suzuka house, Sen-hime and her family is given more favor above other demons. Her house in Edo is an ancient abode that the great Suzuka Gozen resided in during the ancient times. It is shielded with magic that protects it from anything evil. Ayato can press his nose against the house's windows and he still wouldn't be able to touch her there.' \_

\_ 'Suzuka Gozen... the great demon princess in the stories who fell in love with a human?' Heisuke spoke up with confusion in his face.\_

\_ 'Yes. She didn't belong to the stories however. She was as real as you and me.' \_

\_ At this confirmation, Sen once more took the floor. When she spoke, she seemed to radiate a different kind of air. One that made everyone in the room listen. \_

\_ 'I have showed you what I really am right before your eyes. There is no more proof that I can offer that can convince you. I can promise you one thing though,' she looked at each and every men in the room with authority. A look that only people of royalty could ever wield. 'I will never let anything happen to her while she's under my protection. I do not let any of my family get hurt.' \_

\_ Nobody moved for a while. Souji's eyes never left her face while Hijikata's amethyst gaze scoured her as if weighing her person. Sannan studied the girl with a different light playing in his eyes. Whatever he was thinking, however, he kept to himself. \_

\_ 'Fine,' Hijikata's voice finally rang within the room. It was full with finality and an authority that nobody dared counter.\_

\_ 'Souji, you go with her.' \_

\* \* \*

><p>'Soujiâ€|?'<p>

Akane stepped out from the shadows of her room into the waiting room where he sat. A sliver of sunlight played at her hair, making it shine brown and gold for a moment. In front of her, Okita turned and gave her a smile before folding the letter he was holding. Her eyes followed his movements and she gripped the sides of her yukata.

'Your hair looks beautiful when sunlight shines on it,' Souji said with his usual smirk twisting his lips. Akane noted something different about it though... No matter how convincing he looks, there is the shadow of worry lurking in his features that he would never be

able to hide from her.

She stepped away from the beam of sunlight she was standing on and settled on a seat beside him. He reached out towards her until his fingers found a strand of her hair.

'More letters?' her voice was quiet when she spoke. He kept his silence for a while and merely continued playing at the strand he caught between his fingers. It would have been a comforting gesture but right now, she just can't find the will inside her to relish it.

'Hai. Yamazaki seemed to have taken a liking in writing to me. I always knew he had a thing for me.'

Akane turned her head to look at him now. Masking the brutality of the situation to make it seem betterâ€¦ she never thought she would ever have the chance to see him do it. A dull throb echoed in her chest. She needed to get answers now. No matter how ghastly the things she might hear might be.

'How bad is it?'

Silence. For a moment there was no sound that could be heard inside the living room except for the softly rustling leaves of the trees outside. The light playing on his face shifted, drowning his features with radiance one second and shadows the next.

'Ayato has started attacking the headquarters.'

Akane jolted so hard he actually released her. She felt as if she had eaten rocks for breakfast, their weight wanting to bury her to the ground. His words were few and straight but it was enough to send her emotions spiraling everywhere.

'We need to go backâ€"'

'No.'

'But Soujiâ€"'

'We are sent here under orders of the commander and the vice-commander. We cannot disobey them.'

She balled her hands into fists. Why is he being like this right now? She may be emotionally unstable but she is far from being stupid. Akane knew that he had never been fond of rules. If he wanted to do something, he wouldn't care if he had to move heaven and earth just for it.

'We both know that you can go there anytime you want. Kondou-san, Hijikata-san, all of them are there. If it is me then you can leave me here. I promise I won't go anywhere. I am fine here. What is stopping you?' her voice rose as panic started washing over her. It was a habit that had been going on for a while now. Her emotions escalating...all while he remained silent and calm.

'Because if I go there now, all that they did will be put to waste. I cannot do that,' he finally answered, his voice serious and almost flat. She almost stopped breathing at the starkness of it. She

couldn't look away from him though, not when she knew he was telling the truth.

'Hijikata-san sent me here for a reason other than securing your safety,' Okita continued as if he read exactly what was running through her mind. 'He knew I am the only you would talk to. He needed answers to his questions now.'

Her eyes, which were staring at the bunch of letters on the table, flickered towards his face as a stark realization hit her. How foolish of her to think she was able to fool them? Even until now when everything between the two of them has been settled, he is still here under duties of a captain.

'You always knew I was hiding something!' she whispered now as she regarded the boy sitting in front of her. Memories of that one night when he expressed his mistrust of her came rushing back to the forefront of her consciousness. For a moment she was transported back to a time when the two of them were still strangers to each other. A time when he would always look at her with probing green eyes. Looking back at it now, Akane could now identify the emotion reflected in his gaze whenever he looked at her then.

It was suspicion.

'All of us knew you were up to something. It was clear from the start that you were different. I was the only one who dared not to follow Hijikata-san's orders and told you I didn't trust you. I have never really been fond of his mind games anyway.'

'But whyâ€"you could have asked me instead. Why did you let me inside the Shinsengumi if you thought I was an enemy?'

A short burst of laughter slipped from between his lips. 'Because it would be easier for us to do something about you if you were with us. And we didn't really consider you an enemy. You looked liked you were hiding something but you didn't really give off the air of a spy. Then there was the fact that you saved me. It was not long for us to realize that you weren't there to do the group any harm. You were just there to protect yourself.'

Akane remained frozen in her spot for a moment. There was a lump in her throat that she tried to swallow as she worked to grasp the reality of the situation. How foolish of her to think that the Shinsengumi would let her in so carelessly? If it weren't for the current situation she was in, she would have laughed at her naivety. Instead, she just stared at the floor, her hands gripping her yukata slightly.

'It'sâ€|time for me to give answers, isn't it?'

He didn't reply. He just looked at her with the usual ghost of a smile playing on his lips.

'You wouldn't believe me. You will thinkâ€"you will think I am crazy,' she said in a rush, panic now clearly showing in her voice. It was the truth. Even as she tried to rack her brains now, she wouldn't know where to start. \*\*\*\_I time travelled. I'm a descendant of a girl who stayed with you. But you haven't met her yet. I can hear voices in my head.\_\*\* Even she thought she sounded

crazy. How can she do this?

She was in the middle of trying to calm the sudden erratic beating of her heart when she felt something warm cover one of her hands. Her tight grip loosened and she looked at his hand on her before her eyes shot towards his face. What she found there was enough to make her breathing still for a half-second. He was smiling at her. The first genuine smile he wore ever since the mess started.

'Give it a try. Crazy isn't really something new to me.'

His words were far from being kind or even convincing at the least. Still, Akane found herself smiling back at him. The hand he was holding moved and she weaved her fingers around his. He's right. If there is one other person she could trust, it would be him.

'Alright. Let's start with an airplane.'

\* \* \*

><p>'Any news?'<p>

A voice from the shadows floated towards the small clearing, thick, low, yet melodious. In front, a girl with flaming red hair bowed her head lower until it almost touched the ground. A small shiver ran though her slight body both from fear and excitement.

'They are still fighting. Our furies are stronger but they are easier vanquished because of their madness. We have lost almost one fourth of our battalion.'

Not a sound was heard from the man for a few heartbeats. Instead, his dark red orbs simply gazed at the woman, sharp and calm in their silence. Finally, he pushed himself off from the wide tree trunk he was leaning on and took a step towards the sunlit filled clearing. As he did, a few clouds gathered ahead, dimming the once bright spot of land. Even the rays of the sun seemed hesitant to touch his being and the remaining beams washed over his figure slowly.

It had been a couple of days since the girl disappeared. Ayato had everything figured out but the appearance of Suzuka Osen wasn't something he thought would happen. He could remember being stirred from his sleep at the feel of her connection with Akane wavering. By the moment he realized what was happening, she was already gone, protected by the ancient spell that the royal family of the Suzukas always held.

In retaliation, he set out his forces against the headquarters. He knew the girl. She may be hiding now but there is no way that she would be able take what was going on forever. After all, with her lineage, she still had the senseless compassion that humans held toward others. She knew the lives taken from this massacre were still under her name. She may be safe she is now but he can definitely draw her out.

But while he could still play this game, he was not ultimately equipped to win it.

His disappearance had left his operations and experiments at a stall.

Despite Hotaru's trials to revive his work, she didn't have the complete materials to work with. The number of rasetsus that he was able to create with Akane's blood have all been vanquished and now, despite the imperfection of the furies of the other side, it was clear to him that he was on the losing end of this war.

Which is why he needs her. And he needs her now more than ever.

'Hotaru, withdraw the men. We are having a change of plans.'

The girl's head shot up from her bow and she straightened herself gracefully behind him. Her body was like a tight string, ready to jump and do any of his orders. Behind all that, however, a curious light remained brewing under her beautiful doll-like face.

'What are we to do, master?'

A small twisted smile tugged at the corner of his lips. Above him, nature seemed to weep as more clouds gathered to cover the blue sky with their darkness.

'Gather them at the headquarters. We will leave the stray dogs for now. After all, it seems like they are not that important enough for her to actually come to their rescue,' he lifted his sword slightly from its hilt with his thumb and stared at the gray sky reflected from his blade. 'I am growing impatient. She has left me with no choice but to bring this game to a larger scale.'

'I understand. I shall leave and withdraw the troops now,' the girl answered with a quiet voice that didn't fail to mask the madness inside her. Ayato knew Hotaru loathed the idea of him needing Akane. But he also knew that if there is one thing that could satiate her hunger, it was the idea of wrecking discord and pain to humans.

'Good. I will meet you at the headquarters at dusk,' he drawled lazily as he watched lightning line the sky above. It was going to rain soon. His smirk widened and formed a smile enough to make corpses stir uncomfortably on their graves.

'Ah and Hotaru?' he called out one last time before he sheathed his blade back to his scabbard. 'For this next step, we need volunteers.'

Thunder boomed and shook the trees around them. Another flash of lightning followed, bathing the two figures in the clearing with its eerie light before they got swallowed by darkness once more. Ayato turned and started walking towards the dark shadows of the forest. There are a lot of preparations that he had to tend to now.

A storm is coming. And he is definitely going to ride it.

\* \* \*

><p>'So you mean a lot of people spend their money just to watch a sport where men run and throw a ball in hoops?'<p>

Akane gave a short burst of laughter and stirred on her position. She and Okita were currently sitting at the covered porch, huddled under

a large blanket with steaming cups of tea in hand. It is early afternoon but the temperature dropped a little with the sky bidding rain.

'After everything I have told you, that is what you remembered the most?'

'Not really. I remember you talking about those things that could make you fly and bring you to countries in just a few hours,' Souji answered with a smirk as he put down his cup. His other arm wound around her waist and she unconsciously moved closer to seek his warmth.

'No questions about me being a time traveler? Or being part oni?' her voice was soft when she spoke again. The last few hours were the most excruciating for her as she struggled with shame and the fear of being labelled mad. A few times, she found herself struggling with her own tears. But he never let go of her hand even once.

'Hmmâ€| I can't really say I'm entirely surprised. After all, we did find you wearing those strange, tight clothes. It was originally one of our suspicions that you were a foreigner,' he answered casually back, his grip on her tightening for a moment. Akane tried to take a peek at his face from her position and stared at the emotion on his face. He had a faraway look on his eyes but the set of his lips were different. He looked calmâ€| relievedâ€|

'Can I ask you something?'

Her hand which was holding the blanket secured around her squeezed the fabric at his question. When she first started telling him her story, she knew there would be one question he would ask her in the end. It was partly one of the reasons why she had never told anyone the truth. Because doing so means she would have to face questions she would never be ready to answer.

'What is it?'

'In that future, did I die helping Kondou-san achieve his dream?'

Akane closed her eyes momentarily. She expected the question but it was not enough to dull the pang of pain that ran through her chest. It was a good thing that her head was currently resting on his shoulder and he couldn't see her face. For a moment, she could see the exact words that were written on the time-beaten book she always used to read. The 386th page of the 7th chapterâ€|

\*\*\_"â€|. And Okita Souji, first division captain and gifted swordsman of the Shinsengumi was diagnosed with the notorious fatal disease, tuberculosis."\_\*\*

She opened her eyes once more when she felt warmth trail down her cheeks. Tears traced themselves across her pale skin and his fingers followed to wipe them away. Akane pulled away from him the same time that he gave a short, sad laugh.

'It's that bad, I see. Well, I can't really complain. This is the path I chose after all.'

'Souji! Iâ€!' what could she say now? No matter how much she pushed herself to do it, she just can't find the heart to tell him what will happen. Her own heart was struggling to process the same fact on its own and it was only then and there that she realized how much she has always been in denial.

'Don't worry. Death has never scared me before. For a warrior, it is a necessary part of life,' he returned his arm around her waist and held her against him. This time he was much gentler though, as if he was reveling in the feeling of another heart beating against him. As if he was appreciating the fact of being alive himself. In return, Akane found one of his hands and held it tightly with hers. It was an act of her defiance against his words. And against fate itself.

\_They brought me here to change things. There is no way they can tear me apart from him.\_

'I won't let it happen,' her voice was quiet and low when she spoke. For some reason everything around them came to a standstill. Even the gently moving leaves stopped their dance and the breeze that flitted across the small courtyard disappeared. It's as if nature itself was listening to her own words.

'Your fate that I know ofâ€! It all happened without me. Now that I'm here, we can change things, right? I won't let youâ€"I will never let it happen.'

He was quiet for a while. When she thought the silence was too much for her to deal with, he turned to her wearing an amused little smile. His eyes shone with a serious light, however, and Akane met them with her equally defiant gaze in return.

'Now, you didn't need to act all heroic towards me, kitten. Sano always said men are supposed to be the ones protecting their women~' he said playfully, his finger starting to trace circles against her palm. It was distracting her in a good way. Still, she didn't miss a beat with her answer.

'From where I came from, girls can be the hero of the story too.'

Okita's smile widened. There was amusement in it as well as pride.

'You know, I've always liked it whenever your eyes look like that. It makes me want to getâ€ closer to you,' he said, his voice dropping a few notes as his gaze grazed over her lips. Akane's eyes widened in return and she automatically leaned back in response. She wasn't able to get too far, however, when the arm around her waist moved her back to him. For a while she forgot the seriousness of the situation. She just sat there frozen, like a moth who couldn't dance away from the flame.

'You're not going to run away?' his voice was more of a whisper now as he spoke once more. Akane could now feel his breath against her lips as he continued to close the distance between them. She could hear her heart thundering against her ears for a while she wondered if he could hear it too.

'I'm here to stay.'

Her answer stopped his advance for a moment. Okita's eyes looked deep into her own brown ones as if looking for confirmation of her words there.

'Good, because I'm not letting you go anywhere.'

That was all he said before he finally moved in once more, his eyes closing as his lips covered hers. Akane did the same as her own met him halfway, moving against him hesitantly at first. Finally, one of her hands lifted to the back of his head while the other one moved to clutch at the front of his yukata.

She didn't know how long they kissed. All she knew was that in that moment, she felt as if all the troubles in the world melted away with him close to her. Ayato, her blood, the war Shinsengumi is facing, his fate. They all faded in the background. There was just him and her and everything was right with the world.

When they finally separated, they were both gasping for air. He was looking at her with a different light in his eyes, something that she felt was reflected on her own as well. For a few heartbeats they remained staring at each other until he finally looked away and shifted to put a little distance between them.

'Sorry, I think I need to cool my head for a while. Lest I want to ravage you here,' he said with a bark of laughter before running a hand through his hair. He sounded like he was joking but she knew from the set of his jaw that he meant his words. In response, she looked down at her hands and tried to stop the heat from crawling up her cheeks. She had shared a kiss with him twice already but this last one they had is definitely a lot more different than the ones they had before.

'I-I understand.'

She saw him slightly move his head towards her in her peripheral vision. Then she heard him chuckle again before she felt his arm pull her close to him once more.

'Could you stop looking like that? It's like you are asking to be bullied. Don't worry, I won't do anything until you're properly mine!'

At his words, Akane found herself looking up at him. She was feeling apprehensive again but for an all too different reason this time.

Properly mine! does that mean?

Feeling her gaze on him, Okita looked down on her and smiled. It was so genuine it made her heart throb almost painfully against her chest once more.

'You know, I could burn the world down for you!' he said with seriousness once more as he gazed honestly into her eyes. Akane let his words wash over her. Then, with a newly realized determination, she answered back.

'And I could watch it burn as long as you are beside me.'

\* \* \*

><p>Akane woke up to the sound of rustling papers and quick shuffling. Sitting up from her tatami, it took a while before she was finally able to recognize her surroundings. She wasn't in the usual room that she used to occupy during the first few nights of her stay at the manor. Instead she found herself at the living room, with Souji's own tatami mat not far from hers.</p>

Seeing his form half-covered with his blankets made her remember about what happened yesterday. The two of them decided to sleep at the living room together because of the storm that picked up during the late hours of the afternoon. Akane haven't been fond of thunder and lightning ever since she was a child and he seemed to have noticed that at the first clap of thunder that almost shook the house. Afraid of nature's wrath herself, it didn't take long before she agreed to their temporary arrangement.

She regarded him now with a small smile on her face as she worked to remove the cobwebs of sleep from her mind. After throwing her own covers from her, she reached out to pull his blanket higher so that he was properly covered by it. The two of them went to bed early but she knew, even with some distance between them last night, that he remained awake until she finally drifted to sleep.

Akane watched over him for a while and marveled at the peace that has settled over his features. He looked so different when he's sleepingâ€| as if there was nothing he was afraid of at all. As she stared, a small movement caught her vision from the door. She looked up just in time to see a parchment being blown away by the gentle breeze that drifted from the windows. The letterâ€| It came just like all the others did while they were sleeping.

It took her a moment to figure out her next action. She wanted to read it more than anything but at the same time fear gripped her for what she could possibly find inside. The paper tumbled and rolled on the floor for a few more seconds until finally, she straightened and caught it between her fingers.

She didn't mean to read it. No, her original intent was to just get it and place it on the pile of the already opened ones by the table. But a familiar dark marking caught her eye and took her breath. She knew it so wellâ€| the dark, rusted color. The messy droplets that trailed across the whiteness like rain.

Dried blood.

With shaking hands, Akane worked to open the parchment in her hands. Unfortunately, she was not the least the prepared by what was written inside. As if in slow motion, she collapsed to the floor, her eyes wide and staring at the messily written words there.

\_Ayato has seized the city. Kyoto is burning with blood and fire.\_

End  
file.